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Losing Hearts and Minds: Development, Dislocation, and the American Failure in Vietnam

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Losing Hearts and Minds: Development, Dislocation, and the American Failure in Vietnam

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
Ben Alter

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2018

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This project is dedicated to Charles Demek, my high school AP U.S. history teacher. Mr. Demek taught for many years, and I was overjoyed to be one of his last classes. I was warned that APUSH would be rigorous, but it was truly a breeze. This is because Mr. Demek *knows his history*. One only had to read so much if they were willing to just listen to him ramble on. It was an unforgettable experience, and I'd do anything to relive it. I loved that class, and there I learned to love history and draw true inspiration from educators. I would not be what I love well if it weren't for Wendy, Sean, and Mark. But I wouldn't be doing what I love *at all* if it weren't for Charles Demek. Thank you.

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List of Acronyms

AFV – American Friends of Vietnam
ARVN – Army of the Republic of (South) Vietnam
DRV – Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam
ECA – Economic Cooperation Association
ECAFE -- United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East
FRUS – Foreign Relations of the United States (series)
GVN – Government of South Vietnam
JCS – Joint Chiefs of Staff
MAAG – United States Military Assistance Advisory Group – Vietnam
MACV – United States Military Assistance Command – Vietnam
MSUG – Michigan State University Group
NLF – National Liberation Front
NSA – National Security Agency
NSAM – National Security Action Memoranda
NSC – National Security Council
NVN – North Vietnam
SDC – Self Defense Corps
SEATO – Southeast Asian Treaty Organization
STEM – Special Technical and Economic Mission
SVN – South Vietnam
TVA – Tennessee Valley Authority
USAID – United States Agency for International Development
USOM – United States Operations Mission (sometimes United States Overseas Mission)
VC – Viet Cong

Introduction

As the French attempted to disengage in Indochina, they became bogged down in an intense war. The United States came to their aid, but simultaneously looked ahead to an Indochina free of French rule. As the U.S. strengthened France with aid, they aided Vietnam as well. By the time of the French surrender in 1954, the U.S. was sure that South Vietnam would be able to join the bloc of nations allied with the West in democracy. To help the Vietnamese get to this point, development was to play a key role.

The only thing that stood in the way of developing the countryside, however, was the security situation. Insurgency would need to be halted in order for development to take place. The Kennedy administration pursued this security to no avail, and as the countryside became more and more chaotic, development in South Vietnam became less and less likely. When Johnson became president, he brought a new approach to development. Would this be enough to revive it? Could the North Vietnamese and the Soviet Union be made into allies in the spirit of building dams, bridges, and highways?

Development was roped into the struggle for the “hearts and minds” of traditional, non-industrialized societies in the late 1950’s and 1960’s. Development and modernization theory were championed as the way to prevent insurgency, and sell nations on a *Non-Communist Manifesto*. But even these champions of development were prone to force when the going got tough. A two-pronged policy of force and development only begot more force. Development would not occur under these pretenses; its potential savior would abandon it. “Hearts and minds,” never won in the first place, would be completely lost.

Chapter 1: A Two-Pronged Policy

In 1951, General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny thought he knew exactly what the Americans in Vietnam were up to. Though commander of the French forces in the Indochina War for a relatively short period (1951-1952), de Lattre quickly took issue with U.S. policy. While Washington supported the French military substantially, it simultaneously prepared for a future Indochinese peninsula devoid of French influence. Aid and projects undertaken by the Economic Cooperation Association (ECA) and Special Technical and Economic Missions (STEMs) were in de Lattre's eyes "American machinations ... transpiring behind our backs." Amidst a war aimed at retaining and strengthening the French Union, the French commander believed ECA and STEM operations treated Vietnam essentially as an independent nation.¹

De Lattre once called Robert Blum, director of the ECA and STEMs from 1950-1952, "the most dangerous man in Indochina." Blum's later writings would confirm de Lattre's suspicions: he believed STEM operations would prove pivotal in building anti-Communist sentiment among the Vietnamese people, and anticipated an impending French withdrawal from Indochina approaching. During his two years of work in Vietnam he assured that American presence in the region would increase in the vacuum left by the French.²

A short-lived predecessor of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the ECA from 1948-1951 carried out Marshall Plan policy. The ECA's investments reflected the fiscal conservatism of its members. Above all else, the administration encouraged investment returns with its client countries. American aid dollars from the ECA often arrived in accordance with

¹ Irwin Wall, *The United States and the Making of Postwar France, 1945-1954* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 244. By the end of the war, the U.S. was paying for 80% of French expenses. In 1950, aid totaled \$133 million; in 1951, \$316.5 million.

² Ibid.

proposals submitted by client countries, and rarely with strings attached.³ STEMs, on the other hand, were quickly shaping up as a direct precursor to U.S. counterinsurgency policy. As early as 1953, STEM officials were already considering initiatives like land reclamation projects that would institute land reform favorable to peasant farmers, and pacification projects stressing the need for effective, indigenous rural defense forces to combat guerrilla warfare.⁴ Following formal recognition of the Bao Dai regime on February 7, 1950, the U.S. had spent by 1952 over \$50 million on these assistance projects, which included clothing refugees, fertilizer and malaria programs. U.S. policy insisted on passing all funding directly to Bao Dai's government, cultivating further French distrust.⁵

Donald Heath, U.S. Ambassador to Indochina from 1952-1955, bore the brunt of defending these policies to the French government; privately, he dissented. Heath wrote that the major interest of the U.S. in Vietnam was to acquire "real estate: strategic position, rice, rubber, and tin," and in the process deprive the Communists of those resources.⁶ His view fit the growing international narrative of American "cola-colonization." It would later serve historians in arguing that the U.S. initially became involved in Vietnam (and, for that matter, all of southeast Asia) as a facet of the ever-expanding *Pax Americana* project; in the case of southeast Asia, primarily to

³ Ibid, 8; Jacob Kaplan, interviewed by W. Haven North, *The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project – Foreign Assistance Series*, March 22, 1999, 5-6.

⁴ "The Ambassador at Saigon (Heath) to the Department of State Saigon, February 21, 1953—9 a.m." *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, 1952–1954, Indochina, Volume XIII, Part 1, Neil H. Petersen (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1982), Document 186.

⁵ George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1979), 17; Robert McMahon, "A Strategic Perspective on U.S. Involvement," in *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, ed. Robert McMahon (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), 79. Though France had established Bao Dai's government a year prior as a "nominally independent entity," significant U.S. funding of and involvement within the government's domestic affairs appeared suspect.

⁶ Wall, 244.

shore up a reviving Japanese economy. Many American officials worried that without viable markets in the region, Japan might turn towards Communist China as a potential trade partner.⁷

Though Heath's comments appear prescient, they should be weighed with his thoughts regarding the Indochina War as a whole. In the September 1953 edition of *Life*, he praised French airmen and soldiers, dying "to prevent all of rich, strategic Southeast Asia from falling under Communist domination," for "fighting the good fight." Clearly, Heath's dissent was not a critique of any U.S. intention to commodify Indochina, but a notion that perhaps France should be left to conclude her war without the specter of "American machinations" forecasting her defeat. He did use this same *Life* piece, though, to suggest that U.S. aid to the French forces in Indochina was justified, especially given their supposed renewed offensive spirit under General Henri Navarre.⁸

Perhaps most telling are Heath's thoughts on nationalism's role in the Indochina War. The ambassador believed communists in southeast Asia had used nationalism, a "phony catchword," well before the Viet Minh. He assured that most in Indochina, especially the Vietnamese, were able to see past this deception and in response were joining the French forces.⁹ Robert Blum took a less negative view of Indochinese nationalism; he believed it to be a real force, moreover one to be harnessed. Looking back on his time in the country, Blum said, "[those of us supporting STEMs] wanted to capture the nationalist movement from the Communists by encouraging the national aspirations of the local populations and increasing popular support of their governments."¹⁰

⁷ Patrick Hearden, "An Economic Perspective on U.S. Involvement," in *Major Problems in the Vietnam War*, ed. McMahon, 71.

⁸ Donald Heath, "France is Fighting the Good Fight," *LIFE* (September 21, 1953): 62.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *The Pentagon Papers*, Gravel Edition, "U.S. Involvement in the Franco-Viet Minh War, 1950-1954" (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).

Increasingly, “the national aspirations of the local populations” came to be associated with Edward Lansdale’s “common man” theory. Having made a name for himself advising Philippine President Ramon Magsaysay’s successful resistance against the Communist Hukbalahap insurgents in the early 1950’s, Col. Lansdale arrived in Indochina as an advisor on special counter-guerrilla operations in 1953. He believed that the Vietnamese common man’s “one real yearning is to have something of his own, a farm, a small business, and to be left free to make it grow as he wishes.”¹¹ Blum believed that the failure of STEM operations and ECA aid during the Indochina War were due to the U.S. “two-pronged policy” of supporting a former colonial power’s war, while economically and politically reinforcing a populace potentially on its way towards independence. The optics were bad, and Blum believed Americans in the eyes of the Vietnamese “came to be looked upon more as a supporter of colonialism than as a friend of the new nation.”¹² However, with the French surrender at Dien Bien Phu on May 7, 1954, it looked as though a new era of more uniform policy in southeast Asia was dawning. The Geneva Conference that ensued divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel, and Lansdale had a new government to work with in what was now South Vietnam, one which claimed it wanted to help the Vietnamese “common man.”

Dividing Vietnam

Ngo Dinh Diem grew in popularity in the U.S. as criticism of the French aims in the Indochina War mounted. During the war he was well known to the de facto “Vietnam Lobby,” which in 1955 formally organized as the American Friends of Vietnam (AFV) and included, amongst other members, then-Senator John. F. Kennedy. Throughout the Indochina War, Kennedy

¹¹ Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake*, (New York: Random House, 1972), 202.

¹² *The Pentagon Papers*, Gravel Edition, “U.S. Involvement in the Franco-Viet Minh War, 1950-1954” (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).

restated his belief that, without promises of freedom, peoples of colonial territories would remain hesitant to join with their imperial administrators to resist communism. In June 1956, at a New York AFV conference entitled “America’s Stake in Vietnam,” Kennedy sang Diem’s praises for delivering much needed progress in just two years. Diem’s government was stable and passing legislation aimed at aiding poor farmers. It had supposedly rehabilitated nearly one million Northern refugees. Schools had been built, and wells were being dug. In summary, Kennedy declared, “Where once a playboy emperor ruled from a distant shore, a constituent assembly has been elected.”¹³ Policymakers throughout the U.S. believed they had a democratic, stable, receptive government in Saigon.

In fact, South Vietnam’s constituent assembly was only grudgingly convened by Diem after much American insistence that he fulfill the will of his voters. During his years in power, Diem would concentrate all power at the very top of his government, which consisted mostly of his family and some senior military officials. Some officials in Washington considered Diem shy, stubborn, and oblivious as his relations soured. U.S. ambassador to the UN Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., later ambassador to South Vietnam, described Diem as prone to “pour[ing] out a babble of words about something totally unrelated” to what he had just heard – especially when confronted with American requests.¹⁴ This claim would serve as an allegory to Diem’s tenure: perpetually out of touch, vigorously pursuing his own agenda, regardless of U.S. policy.

Diem had long worked to establish his anti-communist bona fides. In the mid-1920’s, he was on the forefront of countering communist infiltration in rural villages of central Vietnam. He rose quickly within the French-supported Bao Dai regime. By 1933 he had served in many

¹³ Papers of John F. Kennedy. Pre-Presidential Papers. Senate Files. Speeches and the Press. Speech Files, 1953-1960. America’s Stake in Vietnam, American Friends of Vietnam, Washington, D.C., 1 June 1956.

¹⁴ David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1965), 249.

appointment positions, including three months as the prestigious Minister of the Interior. He left this government following disputes with the French leaders, arguing that Vietnamese should have more say in their government. In 1945, he declined occupying Japan's offer for the position of prime minister following their decision to reinstall the Vietnamese monarchy under Bao Dai.¹⁵ Months later he again declined a leadership role in Vietnam, this time offered by Ho Chi Minh who, following the Viet Minh's August Revolution, was serving as the Premier of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh's primary interest in Diem was likely to take advantage of his Catholicism, as he believed Diem could serve as a rallying figure for Catholic Vietnamese who had a reputation of being well-organized politically.¹⁶

Numerous historians have addressed the problem of Diem's Catholicism, as he was to eventually rule a Buddhist-dominated country. Religion, however, greatly aided his reception when he and his brother traveled to the U.S. in 1950, as did praise from American diplomats in Saigon. While U.S. policy at the time was to support France in Indochina, American advisors privately foresaw a future of limited French influence in the region. As a reliably pro-American figure, many believed he might call attention to the communist struggle in Vietnam while touring the U.S. As a result, he was received by then-assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern affairs Dean Rusk. Together, Diem's group and American officials toured robust examples of U.S. industry and in conversations entertained the idea of creating a Vietnamese standing army with American supplies.¹⁷

Following a year's worth of travel, in 1951 Diem settled down in the northeast of the U.S. For two years Diem lived in the Maryknoll Missions in Ossining, New York and Lakewood, New

¹⁵ George Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 11.

¹⁶ Fitzgerald, 108-110.

¹⁷ Joseph Morgan, *The Vietnam Lobby: The American Friends of Vietnam, 1955-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 3.

Jersey. It was then that the Eisenhower administration turned to him as South Vietnam's new leader. Returning in 1957 as president of Vietnam, Diem cast his time at Maryknoll as formative:

It is in this house that I brought into clear vision the principles on which I determined to base my fight for my people. Here I drew up the principles which inspired the Constitution of our nation ... It is likewise through this house, and thanks to those who lived here, that I made so many contacts with people throughout America, contacts which have helped me so much in our struggle.¹⁸

Indeed, Maryknoll served as a base from where he urged dignitaries of the Catholic Church to press Washington to support a free Vietnam. Known for receiving Holy Communion with the Brothers every morning, Diem won over the clergy at Maryknoll. One Rev. Raymond A. Lane was so enamored with Diem that, in December 1952 and January 1953, he wrote directly to a few of his personal contacts – John Foster Dulles and General Douglas MacArthur, respectively – in an effort to personally introduce the future leader.¹⁹

Diem eventually met with Democratic senators Mike Mansfield (another member of the AFV, and eventually dubbed “Diem’s godfather” due to his considerable support for the man) and John F. Kennedy.²⁰ Both proved increasingly receptive to Diem’s anti-colonial, anti-communist rhetoric. Following the stalemate of the Korean War, and in an atmosphere of McCarthyism, Democrats were searching for opportunities to insist on their own anti-communist credentials. Diem’s religion, education, and instinct to appeal to the U.S. would continue to win him support in Washington following his return to Vietnam in 1953.

¹⁸ Ngo Dinh Diem, “Address given by Ngo Dinh Diem, President of Vietnam,” May 27, 1957, Folder 1 – G.C./Diem, Ngo Dinh/Press Releases, Maryknoll Mission Archives, Maryknoll, New York.

¹⁹ Folder 1 – G.C./Diem, Ngo Dinh/Press Releases; Rev. Raymond A. Lane, M.M., D.D., Superior General, correspondence with John Foster Dulles (December 24, 1952) and General Douglas MacArthur (January 12, 1953), Folder 3 – G.C./Diem, Ngo Dinh/1950-1969, Maryknoll Mission Archives, Maryknoll, New York.

²⁰ Seth Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 41.

Support in the U.S. still did not assure Diem the ultimate leadership role in Vietnam. In June of 1954, a month after the French surrender at Dien Bien Phu, Diem accepted Bao Dai's offer to serve as Prime Minister of Vietnam's new government. During the armistice which followed the end of the war, the French made clear their distrust not only of Diem but more generally American "intrusion" which they believed aimed to wrest control of the former colony. With U.S. support, Diem would do just that. With the help of the U.S. Seventh Fleet (also known at the time as the "Tonkin Gulf Yacht Club" due to their operational theater), Diem shipped over 800,000 Vietnamese refugees South under the pretense of "saving" them from communist North Vietnam. The majority of these Vietnamese were Catholics, who formed a base for Diem to rule with in South Vietnam.²¹

This transplanted base was wholly superfluous during the elections of October 23, 1955, however, as Diem's brother Ngo Dinh Nhu sloppily rigged the vote to give Diem a whopping 98% majority. In Saigon alone, Diem won over 133% of the voters. The election installed Diem as the new country's president, and did away with Bao Dai and the Vietnamese monarchy. With the new government firmly in power, civic action and other counterinsurgency programs now seemed of paramount importance, especially as the Geneva Conference of 1954 allowed free migration between the two Vietnams. Throughout the year that followed, nearly 90,000 Viet Minh sympathizers relocated North of the 17th parallel, many with explicit intentions of returning South following elections to initiate the project of reunification. Many of these sympathizers also threatened those who chose to remain, suggesting that supporters of the new American-backed South Vietnamese government would face reprisals.²² Twelve days before the election, the border between North and South Vietnam had been heavily sealed, Diem not even willing to permit a

²¹ Herring, 48-49; Fitzgerald, 111-113.

²² William Nighswonger, *Rural Pacification in Vietnam* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), 48.

postal service arrangement with the North. Significant American aid to Diem now began to flow in.

Civic Action cadre were one of the forces that Lansdale raised to stave off communist insurgents in the Philippines. Meant to promote the government's solidarity with populations in remote and rural areas of the country, Civic Action cadres would engage agrarian communities with village and hamlet infrastructure projects, provide assistance in medical administration and farming, as well as provide defense in case of insurgent infiltration, and train others in self-defense. Winning over the "hearts and minds" of these local populations would become a tenet of counterinsurgency, as would the idea of "pacifying" these regions. Pacification was a project of interlocking goals: it called for clearing the countryside of guerrilla forces and propagandists, but also ensuring that the region's resident populations actively resisted these subversives, as opposed to taking neutral or supportive stances in the conflict. By eating, sleeping, and working with the rural South Vietnamese (what Lansdale deemed the "Three Withs"), Civic Action cadres would begin to accomplish rural pacification.²³

While American advisors like Lansdale saw the rural population as something to be won over, Diem's primary concern was political control, particularly in urban centers. With the French military entirely withdrawn by spring of 1956, in June Diem's government abolished the elective village administrative councils via memorandum. Diem's Ministry of the Interior mandated that villages, which had long operated autonomously, now extensively cooperate with the newly-formed Civil Guard and Civic Action forces and create new administrative committees responsible directly to Saigon. A further Ordinance issued that October placed these new village chiefs directly

²³ Nighswonger, 35.

under the president's control. As part of his attempt to affect a "Personalist Revolution" under himself in South Vietnam, Diem alone now appointed all rural leadership.²⁴

That same year, Diem held constituent assembly elections and drafted a constitution for what was now his Republic of South Vietnam. Power in South Vietnam was becoming highly centralized under Diem's regime, though not effectively, and at the expense of rural independence. The regime intruded into these to suppress factionalism. It gave forces like Civic Action responsibility for completing this work. That year it was estimated that the population of South Vietnamese concentration camps stood at 20,000, containing not only communists, but locals of note and members of religious sects deemed hostile to Diem.²⁵ In 1957, Diem's controlling brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, assumed control of Civic Action. Already a divisive program, Civic Action became part of Nhu's growing political-intelligence apparatus and associated primarily with harassment of peasants.²⁶

Nonetheless Civic Action cadres, about 2,000 strong beginning in 1956, worked to engage peasants in previously held Viet Minh territories. They undertook projects ranging from education, medicine disbursement, and census surveys to major road repairs and irrigation canals. Yet Civic Action missions failed to implement major land reform, which American advisors believed was the top priority. Following the 1954 Geneva Conference, surveys estimated that 2.5% of those living in former Cochin China (a French designation referring to the Southern section of the country, which included the fertile Mekong Delta) owned half of the cultivated land, while 70%

²⁴ Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 20-21.

²⁵ Fitzgerald, 120; Bernard Fall, "The Birth of Insurgency," in *Viet-Nam Witness, 1953-1966* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), 171. As Presidential Ordinance No. 6 of 1/11/56 stipulated, "by decision of the President ... all persons considered as dangerous to national defense or collective security" could legally be imprisoned for up to two years.

²⁶ Nighswonger, 36.

owned less than 12.5%.²⁷ Later estimates placed nearly half of the arable land in South Vietnam in the hands of landowners holding 50+ hectares, with less than 13% allocated to smallholders.²⁸

The Viet Minh had enjoyed great popularity in the countryside during the Indochina War partly due to their support of peasants and hostile treatment of landlords. They derived wide support from peasants due to a strikingly non-communist guarantee – that of private property. Additionally, war correspondent Bernard Fall found that under Viet Minh control rice exports quickly rejuvenated to their pre-World War II levels. In the post-cease fire years they quickly dipped over half. Despite the bitter struggle that engulfed Vietnam during the Indochina War, many poor Vietnamese likely felt some benevolence for the period and Viet Minh rule. In contrast, under Diem's reign, landlords returned with great power, as did taxes and exactions, forced labor, and ultimately a class of landless poor, all reinforced by the reach of Civic Action cadres into rural communities.²⁹

Where Civic Action cadres did not pursue oppressive policies in the countryside, they remained further ineffective due to their composition. Catholic refugees brought down from North Vietnam in 1954 following the French surrender were favored for Civic Action service. These refugees often spoke a different dialect than that of the South Vietnamese, were the recipients of a costly government welfare and resettlement program, and were now forcing their anti-communist messages upon previously-liberated villages. Essentially, they showcased the great divide between the South Vietnamese government and its rural populace: as religious and cultural differences,

²⁷ Fitzgerald, 202.

²⁸ Fall, "The Birth of Insurgency," in *Viet-Nam Witness*, 179.

²⁹ Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 62; Fall, "The Birth of Insurgency," in *Viet-Nam Witness*, 175-176.

compounded the government's unwillingness to support or even identify with the majority of its people.³⁰

Unprepared for a War that Won't Come

Even if the U.S. mission to South Vietnam was unaware of the damage being done by specific Civic Action cadres, officials were beginning to understand that Diem's policies were in many ways a detriment to Vietnamese society. Elbridge Durbrow, Ambassador to South Vietnam (1957-1961), after less than a year at his post, reported encountering "more and more grumblings and expressions of discontent" for Diem amongst the Vietnamese people. In a December 1957 dispatch to the State Department, Durbrow and three other civilian officials³¹ from the U.S. mission in Saigon prepared a report in which they leveled serious criticisms against Diem and his governance. The already-limited capability of the South Vietnamese government, the four contended, was severely hindered by Diem's "suspiciousness and authoritarianism." His assumption of all responsibilities was evidently well-known, as was his authoritarian-esque obsession with priming security forces at the expense of implementing "agrarian reform, laying the foundations for industrial development, monetary reform, [and] building up an administrative and technical base needed if only to implement [U.S.] aid programs."³²

The December report freely expressed what the mission believed were Diem's enduring advantages, but noted within the constituent assembly's democratic bloc, "None of the so-called

³⁰ John Montgomery, *The Politics of Foreign Aid: American Experience in Southeast Asia* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), 71.

³¹ U.S. Operations Mission Chief Leland Barrows, Embassy Counselor Thomas D. Bowie, and Economic Affairs Officer Wesley Haroldson.

³² "Despatch From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State," *FRUS*, 1955-1957, Vietnam, Volume I, eds. Edward C. Keefer and David W. Mabon (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1985), Document 409.

opposition leaders ... have yet proven to have the quality of statesmen.” Durbrow indicated the close relationship shared between Diem and General Williams, Commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group – Vietnam (MAAG) from 1955-1960, as yet another reason to temper the criticisms with a begrudging respect for the South Vietnamese president. In hindsight, the dispatch nonetheless indicates a potential conflict of interest within that relationship. Durbrow acknowledged that Williams disagreed with the bulk of the dispatch. The general believed Diem should continue focusing on building military forces as they were quite weak at the time. By contrast Durbrow believed that Diem could move on numerous fronts, supporting military security as well as rural development. At Williams’s request, the four moderated the report’s tone, but not enough for Williams to embrace its conclusions. The discussion between Williams and Durbrow preceding the dispatch was apparently quite heated, with Williams insisting that Americans must not identify with Diem’s external critics.³³

Williams, nicknamed “Hanging Sam” from his World War II days, had reason for pursuing a policy focused primarily on building of the South Vietnamese army. In 1954, then-Secretary of State John Foster Dulles outlined a policy of “massive retaliation” in response to communist subversion throughout the developing world. The policy implied that, even in the case of a local war, the U.S. might either threaten or even deploy nuclear weapons to achieve deterrence. Under Eisenhower, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) revised the fundamentals of national security policy to integrate nuclear weapons into the U.S. arsenal. Nuclear weapons would be used “in general war and in military operations short of general war,” pursuant to presidential authorization.³⁴

³³ Ibid; Ronald Spector, “The Failure of Vietnamization,” in *Major Problems in the Vietnam War*, 114.

³⁴ David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 14-15.

The shift towards greater reliance on nuclear deterrence under Eisenhower should not be construed as a no-holds-barred approach to communism in the developing world. Logic, though guided by severe miscalculation, informed this shift. David Kaiser explains in *American Tragedy* that U.S. policymakers since World War II had struggled with the concept of winning decisive victories, especially in local wars, in arenas in which advantages of manpower would dwarf U.S. technical superiority. In southeast Asia, this was especially the case. Moreover, following the stalemate that concluded the Korean War, Americans resisted another land war in Asia, particularly on the Chinese border. Nor did U.S. policymakers desire to provoke Communist China's direct military assistance to North Vietnam, a potential development they had been worried about since as early as 1949, even before Korea. Finally, even if nuclear weapons proved no more popular than deploying American troops to southeast Asia, they were cheaper than deployments and a powerful deterrent.³⁵

Marilyn Young in *The Vietnam Wars* and Michael Herring in *America's Longest War* are quick to point out that, within the U.S. military, the lessons of the Korean War were not learned. Local communist insurrection and acts of terrorism in the South, in the minds of U.S. commanders, could only be interpreted as signs of an impending North Vietnamese invasion. The U.S. military believed that had been the case in Korea, where Korean communist insurgents had operated independently from 1945-1950.³⁶ Convinced these local insurgents could only be funded, furnished, and directed by the North Vietnamese, Diem and Williams agreed that preparing the South Vietnamese army for a massive war was the strategic decision going forward. So deep in this mindset were Diem and Williams that they believed heightened insurgent activity to be merely

³⁵ Kaiser, 14; Herring, 9.

³⁶ Herring, 58; Young, 73-74.

a distraction, an attempt to “get the Army dispersed on security missions to prevent training” for the impending invasion.³⁷

As of July 1956, the invasion by North Vietnamese forces failed to materialize. The Geneva Accords had mandated that elections to reunite the country be held within two years. At the time, Washington had preferred no deadline, while the North Vietnamese had argued for elections as early as six months after the cease fire. Appealing to the cochairmen of the Geneva Conference, Great Britain and the Soviet Union, in the summer of 1956 the North Vietnamese hinted at renewed military action if elections were not held. But with U.S. backing, Diem refused to budge, and by August it seemed as though the danger had passed.

Rather than reassure the U.S. officials, this episode seems to have only heightened their vigilance and resolve. At the end of August, the Eisenhower administration revised the U.S. defense of South Vietnam (and Laos) from one of Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) obligation to one of national security policy. If need be, the U.S. would defend South Vietnam without the assistance of the obligated SEATO signatories.³⁸

In the face of the potential July crisis in 1956, the Eisenhower administration had prepared to augment South Vietnamese forces with specially trained U.S. ground forces and naval and air atomic support.³⁹ When the Geneva deadline passed without incident, the determination to raise a strong South Vietnamese army only grew. This strategy reflected American conventional wisdom of the era – as championed by Dulles – that a strong army was vital to develop a stable government and deter communist ambitions. Beginning in 1956, U.S. economic and security assistance to South Vietnam totaled nearly \$300 million per year. In the period 1955-1961, the country would

³⁷ Ronald Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941-1960* (Washington: Center of Military History, 1985), 320.

³⁸ Kaiser, 18.

³⁹ Ibid, 16-17.

receive in total over \$1 billion from the U.S., of which 78% was directed towards military assistance. This figure did not include police training and direct equipment transfers; conversely, only 2% of funds went to health, housing, and community development programs.⁴⁰

As with much of the later counterinsurgency doctrine, overall U.S. thinking towards nation building placed an undue emphasis on security over development. Williams, committed to recreating an army similar to the one he served in during World War II, anticipated that the Vietnamese conflict would indeed take the shape of a state-on-war involving regular forces and open battles. Yet, the general could not ignore the deteriorating security situation within South Vietnam. He once communicated to Diem that the “real danger lies in the local Viet Minh cadre,” and that pacification programs required serious attention. Military journalist Thomas Ricks points out that Williams’ successors, as well as the subsequent iterations of MAAG, would focus even less on pacification programs and counterinsurgency practices recommended by other missions. The U.S. military drew on its past experience rather than adapt to the peculiar circumstances it encountered in Vietnam. In the face of growing insurgency, US advisors continued to pursue traditional military doctrine.⁴¹

Williams’ recognition of growing internal threats was not an endorsement of civilian mission operations, but of the need for paramilitary forces to supplement regular army units. The Civil Guard force served that purpose, though throughout the late 1950’s the force was considered impressive only in size. Over time, the training and administration of the Civil Guard served as a sort of case study of the tensions between civil and military priorities. Without a doubt, members

⁴⁰ Herring, 56; Frederick Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2013), 669. The Pentagon as recent as 1954 suggested evidence of political reform should be a condition for significant military aid.

⁴¹ Thomas Ricks, *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012), 224-226.

of civilian agencies recognized the need for paramilitary and military action; however, as security in South Vietnam deteriorated, the military mission would emphasize security over pacification. In the process, MAAG denied civilian agencies influence over internal security. As the military mission pursued its own strategy, it inadvertently aided Diem's enhancement of his grip over the countryside, while abetting communist propaganda that looked to exploit the divisions in South Vietnamese society.

The Civil Guard reform was yet another initiative that failed to fulfill its initial intent. Second only to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) in size and scope, the Civil Guard was designed to patrol rural areas, collect intelligence, and serve as an armed, uniformed, full-time mobile defense unit. Composed of scholars and public administration experts, the Michigan State University Group (MSUG), which arrived in Vietnam in the summer of 1955, was charged with training the then 50,000-strong Guard. The MSUG's idea for the force, however, would soon prove vastly different from that of Diem's.

The MUSG initially believed the Guard should be "a civilian police in every respect ... apart from any military encampments, directed and instructed by the civilian personnel on civilian matters." The MSUG also called for the whole of the National Police apparatus to be "so trained and distributed that they will very soon popularize themselves with the populace through extra services and courtesies." This goal would be best accomplished, the Group argued, by a reduction in force of about 50% and an effort to settle the Guard units in villages. By doing this, the families of the Guard, settled alongside the units, could contribute to the Guard's "popularization" through work within the villages.⁴² Further, settling Civil Guard units should have in theory increased their mobility and response time.

⁴² John Montgomery, *The Politics of Foreign Aid: American Experience in Southeast Asia* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), 66.

That was not the case. Province chiefs, who controlled Guard units, were now responsible to the Ministry of the Interior and, really, the President. They functioned separately and lacked coordination. In order to cross into a new province when responding to a threat, Guard units needed the approval of the neighboring province chief. That left units uncoordinated and slow to respond to threats within their own province or even more in neighboring provinces. Central barrack housing further isolated them from the province's villages. Communist infiltrators learned to seize major opportunities when the units retired for the evening. By basing smaller units within the villages and creating a central command accessible to the province chiefs, the Civil Guard would become much more effective.⁴³

In November of 1955 Diem had moved control of the Civil Guard from the Ministry of the Interior to the Presidency, likely to tout greater coordination of the forces while in reality to increase his control of the countryside. Diem had originally been suspicious of the Civil Guard units, as they were often composed of illiterates as well as those who had resisted his rule in paramilitary units following the 1954 Geneva Conference. The Guard had also at first represented a formidable threat to this control; it was larger than all of his police forces combined, and not under his personal control.⁴⁴

By 1957, however, Diem had apparently found new utility in the mobile forces. Now believing the 54,000-strong⁴⁵ Civil Guard units worked well in keeping young and energetic Vietnamese loyal to his regime, Diem wanted to maintain the strength of the force so as to augment his military forces (limited by the Geneva Accords) to 150,000. In July of 1957, Diem's government requested \$60 million in heavy equipment including bazookas, helicopters, and

⁴³ Ibid, 66-67.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 65. The Civil Guard at creation was larger than the combined forces of the municipal and communal police, the gendarmerie, the sûreté, and the volunteer rural police organizations

⁴⁵ Spector, 320.

armored vehicles for the Civil Guard. This dwarfed MAAG's proposed expenditures of \$18 million and the MSUG's of \$14 million.⁴⁶ When Diem and the MSUG clashed in their plans, Diem began to use the force as "a dumping ground for inferior army officers."⁴⁷

The MSUG had arrived in Vietnam under the directorship of Dr. Wesley Fishel, a supporter and close friend of Diem. But after three years in the country, Fishel returned to the U.S. From that point on, the MSUG's influence waned in all security matters advisory and administrative; the Civil Guard simply proved to be its most evident representation of decline. Not prepared for an ideological battle veiled in budgetary requests, after June 30, 1959 the Public Safety Division of the U.S. Operations Mission (USOM, sometimes referred to as U.S. Overseas Mission as well) assumed control of Civil Guard training. The arrangement did not last long. In late 1960 the responsibility of Civil Guard training again changed hands, this time over to the MAAG, no doubt a comfort to Williams, who had always seen the MSUG as "police types who don't see the big picture."⁴⁸ The force which Lansdale had called "pathetically unready for the realities of the Vietnamese countryside"⁴⁹ would now receive better equipment.

Even as the Kennedy administration bolstered the Civil Guard in its new military posture, its remained ineffective. Similarly, the incoming administration's strategy for rural development would be largely drawn from development during the Eisenhower years. And again, like the Civil Guard, rural development would be criticized for its ineffectiveness, would become more militant to compensate for perceived issues of security, and would remain ineffective over time.

⁴⁶ Montgomery, 68-69.

⁴⁷ Herring, 59.

⁴⁸ Spector, 322.

⁴⁹ Herring, 59.

Uprooting the Garden State

Responding to calls for land reform, in 1955 Diem limited individual land holdings to 100 hectares (247 acres). The national then faced the great task of redistributing the oversize plots amongst smallholders. It did so at a lackluster pace; two years after Diem's proclamation, somewhere between 3.5-5% had been allotted to fewer than 19,000 farmers.⁵⁰ Such limited measures did not usher in any new age of prosperity, as many Vietnamese peasants simply transitioned from paying onerous rents to incurring vast loans owed to the national government. To pay these loans, which were strictly enforced, peasants were forced to sell what little produce and livestock that did belong to them. Many were even forced to purchase land awarded to them by the Viet Minh prior to the division of the country.⁵¹ Frances Fitzgerald argues that traditional Vietnamese views of land did not include a concept of "private property," but instead embraced a loose "trusteeship" system.⁵² Under Diem's rule, rural populations confronted the consequences of privatized property, a concept which quickly took on a negative connotation.

It must be noted that Diem never intended to undertake true land reform. In this instance, he did little more than attempt to convince his American critics that he stood for the common man's betterment. Historians have pointed out that in all of these 'land schemes,' Diem manifested his lack inability (and unwillingness) to identify with the Vietnamese peasant farmer. Yet Marilyn Young in *The Vietnam Wars* makes a further point, that indeed many of the measures that placed landlords back in power were not implemented simply out of cruel misunderstanding. Always fearful of the countryside, Diem's government maintained landlords as a method of keeping

⁵⁰ Fall, "The Birth of Insurgency," in *Viet-Nam Witness*, 179. The 1955 law permitted holding an additional 15 hectares "for purposes of ancestor worship."

⁵¹ Ronald Spector, "The Failure of Vietnamization," in *Major Problems in the Vietnam War*, 115. Spector writes that at least one farmer was reportedly "placed in a cage too small to stand up in and had to remain there until his wife sold their oxen" to pay off a loan.

⁵² Fitzgerald, 11.

control in provinces in which their presence was weak or wavering. Unquestioningly, landlords brought oppression that Diem undoubtedly believed a small price to pay for rural stability.⁵³

With this in mind, Diem's rural initiatives should be identified as what they were: various methods of imposing order on rural populations. The agrovillage, launched in February of 1959, was another land scheme his government undertook although only in a sanitized form. In fact, among the experimental resettlement programs Diem's government launched between 1956-1960, it was the largest. Agrovilles forcibly relocated nearly one million peasants into planned communities, equipped with electricity, schools, medical facilities, and other amenities. In practice, peasants received a frightfully small subsidy with which to build their new homes – Diem called this the “community development principle.” American policymakers, whether deceived or self-deluding, actually found promise in the planned communities, or at the very least a whiff of gumption in Diem's scheme. The defects in the scheme forced the government to terminate the program by 1960. Before its termination, however, agrovilles had displaced hundreds of thousands of peasants and provoked their bitter discontent.⁵⁴ One communist leader remembers an outpour of his village who, faced with government mandates to tear down their houses and relocate, said, “If we're going to die, we're going to die right here, we're not going anywhere.”⁵⁵

Even so, Diem's vision inspired U.S. civilian policymakers. In 1959, Kenneth Young, Director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs in the State Department, visited South Vietnam at Diem's request to survey the government's rural development programs in action. Subsidies to South Vietnamese farmers encouraged them to grow crops like sweet potatoes, cocoa, coffee, and

⁵³ Young, 64.

⁵⁴ Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 127; *America's Longest War*, 68.

⁵⁵ Nguyen Thi Dinh, “Revolutionary Stirrings in the Countryside,” in *The Vietnam War: An International History in Docs*, ed. Mark Atwood Lawrence (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 52.

tobacco so as to increase the country's market diversity, but also in an attempt to curtail the population's heavy reliance on rice. Living conditions improved modestly as villagers received access better schools and medical services, and were able to herd more livestock. Young attributed much of this improvement to "the crucial role of the bulldozer and tractor in clearing the way" for the new resettlement areas. The resettlement projects were ostensibly designed to aid farmers in retaining land and producing more effectively, which Diem hoped would serve his ultimate goal of building political loyalty in the countryside. Meanwhile, the modified geography of the areas deprived the insurgents of favorable territory and easy access to villages. With forests bulldozed, communists would be easily detectable, and guerrilla warriors forced to go on the offensive.⁵⁶

Under the guise of "urbanism," Diem collected scattered rural families on fertile grounds in new village centers. Young, after a rural inspection trip, bought into much of Diem's policies and emphasized the president's "imaginative conception and rapid execution" of the resettlements. In what reads as a reflective moment, Young recalled,

He showed me the plan for this new village, pointing out where the new houses, the market, the church, the canals and the roads would be located. From the tower where we stood surveying the scene in all directions, he could visualize for me an attractive new town and a new arrangement of life along the canals in this lush green delta. He remarked later that this whole area would be transformed into a "Garden State, like New Jersey".

Regarding agrovilles, Young had little to say: "Unfortunately, it was a good idea poorly begun ... But with less compulsion and better public relations it may be resumed with success."⁵⁷

Young's report contained much original thinking as well. It described his own rural development ideas, which in many ways built off of Diem's. "Compound communities" or "village clusters," as Young called them, would be circles of villages which sprouted hamlets and further

⁵⁶ Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. National Security Files. Meetings and Memoranda. Staff memoranda: Rostow, Walt W.: Guerilla and unconventional warfare, February 1961: 17-28.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

connected to make one large circle. Keeping these large communities connected would serve the purpose of “agrimetro,” the concept of implanting new rural villages and vitalizing old ones. Villages and their subsidiary hamlet clusters would be connected by small roads to create an “agro-center.” Services found in these agro-centers would range from bus terminals and marketplaces to vocational training institutes and chopper pads in an attempt, all-encompassing in serving Young’s conception of the needs of the modern compound community. Key to Young’s plans were radio communications at road intersections, enabling defense forces to quickly respond to insurgent crises.⁵⁸

Even if these specific schemes failed to take shape, the Diem regime clearly needed to address the organization of rural populations for security purposes at least in conjunction with the improvement of their living standards. Like all advisors to Saigon in the late 1950’s, Young was increasingly concerned with improving responses to insurgent attacks. Following the Geneva Accords, though most Viet Minh soldiers and cadres moved north of the 17th parallel, about 10,000 remained in South Vietnam. Those left behind undertook a campaign of agitation and propaganda. Pictures of Ho Chi Minh and copies of the Geneva Agreements began to appear in rural households. By 1957, communist guerrilla attacks were swiftly on the rise. The year began with heavy ARVN-guerrilla clashes in the Mekong Delta. It was around this time that Diem dubbed these guerrilla warriors ‘Viet Cong’ (VC), a slang name for Vietnamese Communists. Armed assaults by the VC, as well as assassinations and kidnappings of local government officials, village chiefs, and local militiamen became commonplace. The year prior, North Vietnam had decided to focus primarily on ‘building socialism’ at home, and supported the VC more in spirit than with resources.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Ibid,

⁵⁹ Ronald Spector, “The Failure of Vietnamization,” in *Major Problems in the Vietnam War*, 115-117.

Early CIA reports the following year placed the guerrillas' strength at about 1,700, nearly double what Williams had estimated only months prior. Against the MAAG Commander's judgement, Diem in 1958 launched major military offensives against the VC. Though the enemy often remained elusive or easily retreated across the nation's western borders, that year the ARVN dealt serious blows to VC forces, and moreover to communist morale, as party membership in South Vietnam rapidly declined. Still, the Diem government experienced insurgent setbacks throughout 1958. In August, guerrilla warriors mustered a force of nearly 400 men and raided a poorly-defended Michelin Rubber Plantation north of Saigon. They made off with weapons and millions of Vietnamese piasters, and in the process dealt a swift blow to the South Vietnamese government. In the wake of the raid, the ARVN appeared deeply inept, while Diem himself was left "deeply perturbed," having visited the site less than a week prior.⁶⁰

The guerrillas decided to renew their offensive in 1959 with new battalions and companies. In January of that year, the Communist Party in North Vietnam had moved to officially endorse the violent overthrow of Diem. By the summer, specially-trained insurgents were moving south of the border by way of Laos. This infiltration was significant as, until 1959, the fiercest fighters in South Vietnam had been sect bands, partisans who often collaborated on offensives but ruled wholly different provinces.⁶¹ In the second half of 1959, the number of assassinations of government officials, village notables, and police officers doubled from those of less than a year prior. Hamlets spontaneously rebelled against GVN forces throughout the Mekong Delta, and as ARVN retreats increased, so too did the number of weapons captured by VC guerrillas – over 1,000 in one month alone during 1960. Northern support compounded the prevailing chaos in the South, and as 1960 approached, the growth of the insurgent crisis within the country was apparent.

⁶⁰ Spector, 313-15 & 330.

⁶¹ Ibid.

As attacks grew bolder throughout the year, the government in North Vietnam was forced to take notice. Hoping to foster some sense of control of the insurgency in the South, in September 1960 the Central Committee in Hanoi voiced its support for the formation of a coalition aimed at liberating South Vietnam. Two months later, at a secret base just 60 miles outside of Saigon, the National Liberation Front (NLF) was formed. In February 1961, Hanoi's leadership became further entwined with the VC's growing organization and dominance of the Mekong Delta.⁶²

The Paramount Consideration

Before Vietnam was an American war, it was a French war; yet within the Indochina War one already finds the clash of civilian and military policies, both of which may have hindered the success of the other. Waging war and winning hearts and minds would prove all the more challenging when pursued concurrently, what Blum dubbed the impractical "Two-Pronged Policy." Blum and de Lattre clashed over their operations, which pursued different goals. As the doctrine of counterinsurgency was established during the Kennedy administration, the goals of the U.S. civilian and military missions to Vietnam would be merged, in theory to assure the ability for both to flourish. Apparent within the 1950's, however, is the predominate concern for security over economic development in pacifying rural populations.

At the end of 1957, Williams consoled himself because the VC "lack[ed] sufficient strength" and "a popular base."⁶³ How wrong he was. The VC would achieve some of their greatest successes in the years leading up to 1960. The U.S. military advisors in Vietnam proved themselves unprepared for this form of guerrilla warfare, and though they attempted to adapt under Kennedy, Sam Williams had already surrendered too much ground to the NLF. The Eisenhower

⁶² Ibid, 330-1; Young, 69-73.

⁶³ Spector, 315.

administration, while prepared for swift, “massive retaliation,” did not plan warfare on a scale suited for the realities of the country. Though an invasion from the North did not come to pass, MAAG’s obsessive view that Hanoi was deeply entrenched in the South stunted the growth of effective counterinsurgency training and tactics.

The civilian mission of the era proved equally unprepared. Where it recognized the impact of Diem’s severe repression, it was ineffective in changing his ways; where it did not make this crucial recognition, it found wholly too much promise in the man. As Kenneth Young implored in his report, “the task now is for everyone to rally around President Diem.” Even in the face of Diem’s major shortcomings, Young felt that the president’s energy for action could be channeled into strategic avenues. Uprooting rural peasants, though potentially traumatic, could ultimately serve “a long-run job of social chemistry,” fortifying South Vietnam’s borders with modern, loyal villages. These new policies could build “psychological momentum,” something Young felt was much needed as the decade came to a close.⁶⁴

Both Diem’s policies and Young’s ideas for rural development required massive relocation of families, antagonizing a society in which land was the family’s “sacred, constant element.”⁶⁵ Future civilian initiatives aimed at fortifying and winning over rural populations would attempt to avoid massive relocations, and fail. It should be noted that Young’s report was delivered to Walt Rostow, Deputy Special Assistant to President Kennedy, less than a month in office. Young, like many at the time, had read Rostow’s work (his most well-known being *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*) with much enthusiasm. As the Kennedy administration ushered in the 1960’s with its pursuit of “hearts and minds,” development in South Vietnam

⁶⁴ Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. National Security Files. Meetings and Memoranda. Staff memoranda: Rostow, Walt W.: Guerilla and unconventional warfare, February 1961: 17-28 (underline in original).

⁶⁵ Fitzgerald, 11.

appeared an excellent arena to build on Rostow's *Non-Communist Manifesto*. This became all the more important when Department of Defense studies found that VC fighters and the NLF saw themselves as legitimate rulers of a free country. Insurgent support in the South was supposedly bolstered by their responses to the desires of peasants, which were not limited to wanting only "something of [their] own ... and to be left free."⁶⁶

Throughout the Diem government's tenure, American oversight bore primary responsibility for the failure of rural development in South Vietnam. While the U.S. poured funding into the country, the Saigon mission and Washington failed to employ (or possess) leverage over Diem. But under Kennedy, a new failure emerged. The goals of the military and civilian missions became intertwined: a pacified, developed rural community would render an area safe for military operations, while effective paramilitary forces would be necessary to establish a community prepared to undergo development. Ultimately, though these merged initiatives within the doctrine of counterinsurgency may have suggested an increase in combined civilian and military operations, in fact military security took precedence over civilian wellbeing. Speaking to Ambassador Durbrow in February of 1960, Williams made evident that he and other high-level military commanders did not see development as essential to counterinsurgency:

The truth is that the population of South Vietnam, like any other, is more responsive to fear and force than to an improved standard of living. The conclusion is clear: The paramount consideration is to gain and maintain a superiority of force in all parts of the country. This is done by developing the military and police potential as the most urgent objective of our national program in Vietnam.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. National Security Files. Meetings and Memoranda. Staff memoranda: Rostow, Walt W.: Guerilla and unconventional warfare, February 1961: 17-28.

⁶⁷ Young, 60.

Rural development would serve as a tenet of counterinsurgency rather than an initiative in its own right. For this reason, military security always had a higher priority, thereby virtually guaranteeing the loss of “hearts and minds.”

Chapter 2: Security First

Despite Sam Williams' retirement from service in 1960, the former MAAG commander's opinions remained influential throughout the decade that followed. His outlook regarding the "truth" about South Vietnam's population – that fear, engendered by effective military control, would prevail over improved standards of living – would continue to weaken the appeal U.S. policies made toward winning their "hearts and minds." During the Kennedy administration, the goals of the military and civilian missions would be merged under a doctrine of counterinsurgency. However, the issue of security would be the utmost priority, in effect encouraging Diem's rural repression while rendering U.S. civilian initiatives ineffective. The military mission had long desired to prosecute a war on its terms. As that war continued to evade them, many chose to undermine civilian mission operations, either by activity or apathy.

The example of the Civil Guard is salient. Following the 1957 Civil Guard budget dispute (in which civilian and military actors seemed to be in general agreement regarding the forces' funding and furnishing), the military mission became increasingly critical of civilian operations. As assassinations in the countryside rose at frightening rates, so too did the military mission's notion that pursuing 'hearts and minds' was a waste of time. This line of thinking likely prompted the wresting of the Civil Guard's training and equipping from U.S. civilian agencies in 1960. In *Rural Pacification in Vietnam*, then-USAID official William Nighswonger, referencing classified interviews with members of his own agency as well as the Department of Defense, reported that personnel from MAAG and others even higher in the U.S. command deliberately obstructed the USOM in arming the Civil Guard in late 1960.¹

¹ Nighswonger, 35. In 1958, nearly 700 South Vietnamese government officials were assassinated; in 1960, this number reached 2,500. See Herring, 67.

Nighswonger wrote that Diem's vision for the Civil Guard was a "hard-hitting mobile force (on wheels) that would be heavily armed and organized in larger units."² Lansdale wanted to see the forces improve, as did both U.S. missions involved with its training, equipping, and budget allocation. Yet considering his admiration for Mao's guerilla teachings, that subversives were best-suited moving throughout the people "as a fish swims in the sea," it's hard to imagine how the ostensibly-invasive Civil Guard forces, now trained by the U.S. military and soon to be armed with choppers and bazookas, would be able to effectively "eat, sleep, and work" with the people. Marilyn Young writes that as the Civil Guard forces and Civic Action teams were further removed from civilian control, they became increasingly associated with Diem's countryside repression and thus ineffective in convincing Vietnamese that their government was worth supporting.³ Countless historians have suggested this bolstered Communist recruitment efforts: as one peasant explained, "Everywhere [Diem's] army came ... they made more friends for the V.C."⁴

Still, the U.S. military mission's apathy towards and activity which contributed to the erosion of civilian policies did not indicate malice as much as a fundamental disregard for non-security priorities. For example, William Westmoreland, later commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) from 1964-1968, tended to regard the Vietnamese people "more as an impediment than as a prize." Those both below and before Westmoreland felt similarly; he was "hardly alone."⁵ Whereas high commanders of the war were largely distanced from the reality of the conflict, lower brass officials were all too aware of the Vietnamese they advised and eventually fought alongside. In some way or another, most members of the U.S. military mission were likely encouraged to think of the Vietnamese inherently as obstacles in South Vietnam. The ruling family

² Nighswonger, 44.

³ Young, 61.

⁴ Ibid, 73.

⁵ Ricks, 238.

certainly fostered this sentiment. For example, the Self Defense Corps (SDC), the lowliest of volunteer fighters often composed of aged peasant farmers forcibly converted into militiamen, were severely undervalued as they were not deemed the gatekeepers of the Diem regime's security.

Neil Sheehan, in *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*, writes that,

Most casualties in defensive actions were also inflicted on the SDC militiamen who manned the posts. The Ngo Dinh's were not troubled by the deaths of these peasants ... They could be replaced by other peasant hirelings at the equivalent of \$10 a month ... Diem thought so little of them that he did not allow wounded militiamen to be treated in military hospitals.⁶

If not faced with the blatant depreciation of low-level indigenous forces, U.S. military personnel interacted with ARVN forces, a poorly organized, often apathetic or cowardly regular army who through their own shortcomings drew U.S. advisors into armed conflict with superior guerrillas. Finally, as Vietnamese civilians embodied the enveloping sea in which guerrillas covertly swam, all became suspect. Ultimately, and largely due to the American-backed Diem government, the U.S. military mission to South Vietnam would never value the Vietnamese in the way that the civilian mission did. Not inundated with the "hearts and minds" philosophy, winning over the Vietnamese was simply not a salient objective to the U.S. military.

Eight days into office, in 1961 President Kennedy responded to an appeal from Diem to increase the forces of the Government of South Vietnam (GVN). In authorizing an aid increase of \$41 million and a troop increase of 20,000, Kennedy's administration sought to move South Vietnamese forces from the defensive to the offensive. Of the \$41 million, \$28.4 was specifically allocated to the Civil Guard.⁷ Such an allocation was sure to divert human and capital resources from economic development initiatives. In Kennedy's Vietnam, the issue would always remain

⁶ Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 123

⁷ Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. National Security Files. Countries. Vietnam: General, 1961: January-March. The \$28.4 was allocated over a period of two years.

security; defense would always be deficient and in need in order for economic development to advance. By tying both initiatives together within one doctrine, the Kennedy administration doomed development. Meanwhile, their military proliferation within a corrupt, unaware South Vietnamese government would lose them hearts, minds, and territory in the countryside, warranting only more military action.

Beef-Up & Delaying the Doctrine

When President Kennedy assumed office on January 20, 1961, U.S. diplomacy focused on the Soviet Union. Global tensions, especially at potential flashpoints such as Berlin, were rising. Only two weeks prior to Kennedy's inauguration, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev had delivered a speech in which he promised to support “wars of national liberation” throughout the world. In order for the Soviet Union to achieve economic superiority, it was vital, the premier concluded, that they supported these struggles in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, zones which Khrushchev deemed “active fronts.” These fronts were also the epicenters of revolutions against imperialist powers that, with aid from socialist states, were slowly gaining victories.⁸

Special assistant to the president Arthur Schlesinger recalled that Kennedy read excerpts of Khrushchev's speech to his first meeting of the National Security Council.⁹ Khrushchev's speech weighed on his mind. Yet whatever its immediate impact on Kennedy, it served only to accentuate concerns the new president had long held, about “limited brush fire wars, indirect non-overt aggression, intimidation and subversion, [and] internal revolution,” tactics through which

⁸ “Analysis of the Khrushchev Speech of January 6, 1961,” (January 1961).

⁹ Douglas Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance, 1950 to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 52.

“[t]he periphery of the Free World will slowly be nibbled away.”¹⁰ Kennedy quickly translated his concerns into a strategy for resisting insurgency. The subsequent transition from executive preoccupation into government policy was complete by early February with the brief National Security Action Memoranda (NSAM) no. 2: “Development of Counter-Guerrilla Forces.” Those closest to Kennedy were charged with publically elaborating his doctrine.¹¹

In June of that year, then Deputy Special Assistant to the president Walt Rostow delivered a speech at Fort Bragg on “Guerrilla Warfare in the Underdeveloped Areas.” Having authored the non-communist manifesto, the former MIT professor worked to tie the phenomenon of communist insurgency to the lack of development within the countries under siege. Dubbed the “Rostovian modernization theory” in some circles, it prescribed that democratic capitalist countries were better-suited to economically “take-off” than their Communist counterparts. Rostow warned that insurgents looked to exploit underdeveloped regions as they moved towards modernization. Furthermore, he felt that U.S. policy needed to effectively respond by depriving insurgents of the countryside in which they found cover, mainly the rural villages and forests populated by often apolitical populations. This would require “not merely a proper military program of deterrence but programs of village development, communications, and indoctrination.” Rostow stressed a proactive policy, arguing the best way to fight a guerrilla was to outright prevent it.¹²

Roger Hilsman, Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the State Department, further developed Rostow’s discussion of counterinsurgency. Writing in “Internal War: The New Communist Doctrine” in August 1961, Hilsman focused primarily on the reform of defense tactics, arguing that the U.S. missions abroad would need “radical changes in

¹⁰ John Shaw, *JFK in the Senate: Pathway to the Presidency* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2013), 113.

¹¹ Blaufarb, 52; Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. National Security Files. Meetings and Memoranda. National Security Action Memoranda [NSAM]: NSAM 2, Development of Counter-Guerrilla Forces.

¹² Blaufarb, 57-59.

organization, combat doctrine and equipment” to repel and contain insurgency. Training would call for small, indigenous defense forces, and while regular forces were essential in regular military tasks, guerrilla warfare would prove anything but regular. Conventional forces relied too much on heavy armaments and excessive firepower, as well as the space and means to maneuver it. Hilsman claimed that this often led to an “erroneous stress on holding land rather than destroying enemy forces.”¹³

Rostow and Hilsman both had the ear of the president. Considering their backgrounds and statements on counterinsurgency, it would appear as though the two should not be considered uniform voices on the subject. Yet the two took different paths to arrive at the same conclusions. Hilsman viewed guerrilla warfare strictly in terms of subversion, indicative of an outside force’s attempt to gain power. Though development was key to Hilsman’s ideas concerning counterinsurgency, his policy of resistance to subversion was a process, in which development came *after* security. Viewed through the lens of economics, Rostow saw insurgency as more a symptom of the disease that was a lack of development, visited upon countries especially in an atmosphere of international communism. To Rostow, development was preventative; however, in the meantime, guerrillas could not be dealt with using the carrot, but the stick. Neither saw economic development as the lynchpin of success in South Vietnam.

While the new administration worked to define their counterinsurgency doctrine, insurgents within South Vietnam continued to amass control. In late 1961, the People’s Liberation Armed Force (PLAF), organized only in February, was 17,000-strong. U.S. intelligence reported that these numbers grew significantly throughout the remainder of the year, roughly 10,000 by the start of 1962. Heavy attacks, executions, and the takeover of a provincial capital just 50 miles

¹³ Roger Hilsman, “Internal War: The New Communist Doctrine,” *Marine Corps Gazette* (August 1961).

outside Saigon in September of 1961 were cause for even Walt Rostow to seriously consider the deployment of U.S. troops. The Diem regime seemed again at serious risk. ARVN morale had also become a common discussion topic. They continuously ceded territory to the NLF when they chose to embark on ineffective patrols; often times they simply remained in their barracks. When they did venture into the countryside, they encountered sniper fire, and in their retreat, they left weapons for the VC to recover. As the terror increased, the isolation of rural populations was compounded by the flight of rich families into South Vietnamese cities. These poorer populations were easy recruits.¹⁴

Dispatched to find the truth in an atmosphere of seeming chaos, Walt Rostow and General Maxwell Taylor, chairman of the JCS, reported back to Kennedy in November and confirmed the bad news. The joint report perceived a “defeatist outlook” amongst the ARVN ranks, and more generally a “deep and pervasive crisis of confidence and a serious loss in national morale.” The report recommended an increase in U.S. military advisors, as well as more comprehensive aid to address not only military shortcomings but natural disasters. Notably, the joint report proposed the dispatch of an 8,000-strong “logistical task force.” This group would be comprised of engineers, medical groups, and forces attached to secure their operations. A seemingly moderate form of intervention, Taylor saw the force as most productive in its symbolism, representing the commitment of the U.S. to South Vietnam. Many military advisors believed this potential was stifled by Diem’s unwillingness to place American combat troops alongside his own.

The Taylor-Rostow dispatch grew out of concessions made by the president a month earlier. On October 9, the JCS had approached Kennedy and recommended the dispatch of 12,000 American troops to the Central Highlands of South Vietnam in order to block Communist

¹⁴ Kaiser, 94; Young, 72-3.

infiltration routes. Two days later, reporting on the whole of Southeast Asia, Deputy Undersecretary of State U. Alexis Johnson proposed a dispatch of 20,000-25,000 to the region for the same purpose.¹⁵ Giving in to his advisors, in National Security Action Memoranda (NSAM) no. 104 Kennedy authorized the dispatch of the covert 'Jungle Jim' squadron to train Vietnamese forces and assist in counterinsurgency operations. Comprised of less than 300 men and a token amount of transports, bombers, and fighter jets, the dispatch would serve purely logistical purposes: it would be no show of U.S. force. Simultaneously, Kennedy finally approved of Rostow's proposed fact-finding mission, likely hoping that he and Taylor would return with proposals other than an increase of U.S. personnel in the country. Confiding in Schlesinger, Kennedy had once expressed his doubts on committing paltry amounts of troops:

The troops will march in; the bands will play; the crowds will cheer ... and in four days everyone will have forgotten. Then we will be told we have to send in more troops. It's like taking a drink. The effect wears off, and you have to take another.¹⁶

The president rejected Taylor's "logistical task force" proposal, aiming chiefly to avoid any dispatch that would indicate an overt show of American military force.¹⁷

Kennedy's restraint was driven by foreign as well as domestic concerns. The failure at the Bay of Pigs in April of 1961 had placed his administration at odds with Republican and right-wing Democrat lawmakers. As they charged the administration with weakness and indecision, they implied that the U.S. needed to take a firm stance against communism elsewhere in the world. Kennedy's cabinet agreed that Vietnam was to be that arena, though in 1961 there was no

¹⁵ Leslie Gelb with Richard Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1979), 74. U.A. Johnson proposed a dispatch of SEATO forces, as opposed to strictly U.S. combat soldiers.

¹⁶ Herring, 83.

¹⁷ Kaiser, 96-98; Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. National Security Files. Meetings and Memoranda. National Security Action Memoranda [NSAM]: NSAM 104, Southeast Asia.

consensus on the amount or nature of force necessary to hold this line. Privately, Kennedy questioned any deployment proposal from a political, strategic, and moral point of view.¹⁸

His reluctance that year culminated in Project *Beef-Up*, which would dramatically increase the U.S. military presence in South Vietnam throughout the rest of his presidency. *Beef-Up* ostensibly handed more responsibilities to the forces of South Vietnam, primarily the ARVN and Civil Guards. These ranged from increased maritime operations to medical training and the construction of hospitals. Yet with these new responsibilities came new oversight. Though the ARVN would now be responsible for greater intelligence collection, they would do so in greater conjunction with the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA). More U.S. aircraft and communication equipment appropriated to the country's defense forces necessitated more training. Napalm was added to the GVN's arsenal, though in theory it could only be deployed with Vietnamese pilots at the controls. U.S. advisors would start accompanying South Vietnamese forces in greater numbers, increasing the chances that they'd see action. And though Kennedy publically downplayed the fact, advisers were now authorized to participate in said combat.¹⁹

When Kennedy took office, there were 800 military personnel serving in South Vietnam. By the end of 1961, there were just over 3,000 in the country. Within a year that number would triple, and by *Beef-Up*'s completion in the fall of 1963, it would reach over 16,000. U.S. military oversight was to become remarkably visible in South Vietnam. The middle ground to a military intervention, albeit temporary, had been found; meanwhile, the developmental aspect of counterinsurgency was largely absent.²⁰

¹⁸ Frederick Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 30-31.

¹⁹ "Status Report of Military Actions in SVN regarding project *Beef-Up* by JCS, (December 26, 1961)," Kennedy Papers, National Security Files, Box 195A; Kahin, 140.

²⁰ Young, 82.

In fact the whole doctrine of counterinsurgency was neither defined nor implemented that year. This should come as no surprise, given what appeared to be the crisis that was South Vietnam in 1961. While VC casualties remained constant throughout the year (and sometimes dipped month-to-month), those of GVN forces steadily climbed. In October alone, GVN forces suffered more than twice as many casualties as they had in January. Similarly, VC acts of sabotage, terrorism, and open attacks increased throughout the year. Though the U.S. aimed to make itself more visible in 1962, the year had been lost to the VC, emboldened by American wavering and a ‘defensive outlook’ which Taylor claimed infected nearly 85% of South Vietnamese forces.²¹ Counterinsurgency, and especially its tenet of development, would have to vie for attention against the backdrop of a deteriorating military situation.

River Man

1961 was the year in which Vice President Lyndon Johnson became acquainted with the war in Vietnam. Kennedy saw in Johnson a potential political adversary; he was set on keeping him on his side, but feared giving the vice president too much power. Eventually, though, Kennedy professed he didn’t know what to do with the man at all: “I cannot stand Johnson’s damn long face. He just comes in, sits at the Cabinet meetings with his face all screwed up, never says anything. He looks so sad.” An aide then suggested the new president send Johnson “on an around-the-world trip ... [to] build up his ego, let him have a great time.” Kennedy loved the “damn good idea,” and that spring sent Johnson to Africa and Asia. He would serve the Kennedy administration as a “goodwill ambassador.”²²

²¹ “Letter From the President’s Military Representative (Taylor) to the President,” *FRUS*, 1961–1963, Volume I, Vietnam, 1961, eds. Ronald D. Landa and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), Document 210.

²² Robert Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson: Portrait of a President* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 126-127.

In April, while in Dakar, Johnson made a show in handing out ballpoint pens and lighters, inscribed “L.B.J.,” to poor villagers. The next month he traveled to Asia, and generated even larger headlines from Saigon, where he passionately declared Diem “the Winston Churchill of Asia.”²³ Johnson’s meeting with Diem significantly factored into his thoughts on Vietnam going forward. The vice president resisted speaking to reporters who decried the many problems of the Diem regime. Johnson believed Diem was America’s man in Saigon: there was no other to go with, and the U.S. was better off providing him what he needed. Later, as president, Johnson weighed heavily the Kennedy administration’s abandonment of Diem when reassuring new Saigon governments.

In Saigon, Johnson promoted development. Speaking to South Vietnam’s National Assembly, Johnson implored those present to

find among yourselves those dedicated men and women who want to heal the sick, those citizens who would bridge the rivers and erect the dams, those patriots who would bring your nation together with roads, those citizens who would establish factories of modern industry, those countrymen who would put brain and hand to your good earth in order that it may be more fruitful. Find the young people who, unafraid, will dedicate their lives to the building of a free and prosperous Vietnam.

The vice president, a New Dealer at heart, truly believed in the power of public works programs to lift agrarian societies into the modern age and, through industrial means, increase efficiency and prosperity. He was also aware of the current buzz around development, including Rostow’s “take-off” theory. Johnson saw America’s role in helping nations make those first, vital steps: “We have faith – a growing faith – in Vietnam and the strength you can build here. We want to work beside you in the great works of the future for your people.”²⁴

Johnson saw development as an opportunity for international cooperation as well as modernization. At its peak, he theorized, development in Asia could even bring together regional

²³ Ibid, 127-128.

²⁴ “Your Statements in Vietnam,” Memorandum from Horace Busby to the president (April 1, 1965), Johnson Papers, National Security Files, Country File: Vietnam, Box 201.

adversaries and make them allies. During his trip to Asia, Johnson also stopped in Bangkok, headquarters of the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE). At ECAFE, Johnson delved into the possibilities development held, and touted one project in particular: the development of the Mekong Delta. A UN press release from the visit describes the project the international community envisioned in 1961:

The Mekong project calls for irrigation, power, navigation and fisheries development of an area of 17 million population. It provides, among other things, for three multipurpose dams on the main stream of the Mekong River, four dams on four tributaries (the Bettanang in Cambodia, the Nam Ngum in Laos, the Nan Pong in Thailand, and the Upper Se San in Vietnam), and the improvement of navigation on the entire course of the river, from Luangprabang (Laos) to the sea.

Unfortunately for Johnson, he found the Mekong project in the data-collection stage. ECAFE Executive Secretary U Nyun assured Johnson that this meant “action in the real sense,” and pointed out that \$9 million worth of aid for the project had been given or pledged by 12 countries and several international agencies.²⁵

Though no doubt delighted with the nations pledged to development, Johnson had to have noticed that (with the exception of China) the nations listed were all allied with the U.S. in the Cold War. The vice president wanted to challenge the international order in the development of the Mekong. His language on cooperation in the region is revealing: he believed “if [Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam] could work together on a river, they could work together on anything else.”²⁶ He chose not to recognize a partitioned Vietnam in discussing the development of the Mekong, believing that an objective international success in his mind would be shared by

²⁵ “UN-Aided Projects in Asia Discussed in Visit of United States Vice-President to ECAFE Headquarters,” Press Release from Office of Public Information, United Nations (May 17, 1961), Johnson Papers, National Security Files, Country File: Vietnam, Box 201. The nations pledged to development were Australia, Canada, China, France, India, Iran, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines, the United States, the United Kingdom, the United Nations and several of its bodies and related agencies.

²⁶ Ibid.

minds within both blocs. And he believed he possessed the vision to carry the project forward. As the Executive Secretary presented to the U.S. delegation on the progress of the project, “Mr. Johnson interrupted the Executive Secretary [of ECAFE], rose from his chair, put his hands in his pockets, jingled some silver coins,” and said, “You know, Mr. Secretary, I am a river man. All my life I have been interested in rivers and their developments.” Johnson re-emphasized the need for getting the project under way to the stage of construction “as soon as possible.”²⁷

The Mekong is one of the most fertile regions in the Indochinese peninsula. Within South Vietnam’s borders, it was also one of the most active zones of guerrilla warfare and U.S. counterinsurgency programs. In 1960 alone, over 800 uprisings took place within the Delta.²⁸ Because of the strategic importance of the Mekong, development would prove hard to accomplish as the war intensified. Possibly as a result, the project was further hindered by a bureaucratic phase which many thought signaled concrete progress. Though the inaugural phase of the project appeared to be nearing its end in the spring of 1961, this was not the case. ECAFE had first prepared a report on the development of the Mekong in 1952, and had done so again in 1957. The latter report, “Development of Water Resources in the Lower Mekong Basin,” had theorized the development of 90,000 km² of irrigation and 13.7 gigawatts generated from five dams.²⁹

Similarly, in 1956 and 1958 the U.S. had dispatched their own survey missions to the Mekong. The 1958 survey, led by former Allied commander Earle Wheeler, agreed that the Mekong “could easily rank with Southeast Asia’s greatest natural resources” if developed properly. But Wheeler felt that greater metrics were needed before ground could be broken in the Delta. His

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Gareth Porter, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 114.

²⁹ Dr. Anoulak Kittikhoun, “BACK TO FUTURE PAST? Cooperation Challenges and Opportunities in Hydropower and Water Resources Development in the Mekong,” (undated presentation, Mekong River Commission).

report proposed a five-year study of the region, at the cost of approximately \$9 million.³⁰ By 1961, a coalition of 12 nations and several UN agencies had pledged for the *entire project* what General Wheeler believed was necessary for a five-year U.S. *study* three years earlier. Joint development in southeast Asia, even among allies, was off to a poor start.

Throughout the late 1950's, studies compelled more studies in the Mekong. As president, Johnson later likened the development of the Mekong to the accomplishments of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), a New Deal program which brought flood control and electricity to the impoverished region. David Lilienthal, former director of the TVA and later the Atomic Energy Commission, was a friend of the vice president and attuned to this way of thinking. In a February 1961 letter to Chester Bowles, Special Representative and Adviser on African, Asian, and Latin American Affairs, Lilienthal discussed the prospects of international development. He agreed with Bowles in that "the TVA idea and method represent a great political asset of the United States in parts of the world other than our own." But on the subject of development in Mekong, Lilienthal was skeptical:

For several years technical investigations and surveys have been carried on in the Mekong basin by many technicians. But I, myself, have seen little evidence that this technical work has been sparked by a broad concept and one with public appeal, or is possessed of a sense of urgency and of a necessity that people can see. Without these factors the chance is not too great that much more will result than reports and surveys...³¹

Lilienthal believed the key to success in such grand projects of development was a "moral purpose."³² In Southeast Asia, he detected little. Especially in Vietnam, if regional leaders and their populations were not convinced that peace and prosperity were directly linked to cooperative

³⁰ Aaron Wolf and Joshua Newton, "Case Study Transboundary Dispute Resolution: the Mekong Committee," (undated).

³¹ "Letter from David E. Lilienthal to Chester Bowles" (February 9, 1961), Kennedy Papers, James C. Thomson Personal Papers, Box 20 (underline in original).

³² Christopher Fisher, "'Moral Purpose is the Important Thing': David Lilienthal, Iran, and the Meaning of Development in the US, 1956–63," *The International History Review* 33, no. 3 (2011): 431-451.

development initiatives, intervention by foreign, industrialized powers would convince them of little. A U.S. insistence on ideology could not replace the lack of their own.

As Lilienthal predicted, all that resulted in the immediacy were more reports and surveys. In early 1962, the outlook for the project's feasibility was no better. Newly proposed U.S. research over a five-year period was put at under \$2 million.³³ In an effort to encourage the project, Bowles suggested to Kennedy that the project "at the most might pave the way for increasing political stability" and would certainly improve the "image and posture" of the U.S. in Vietnam.³⁴ But as civilian advisors worked to launch these grand development projects, the security situation in South Vietnam continued to deteriorate. 1961 called for a reevaluation of U.S. policy in the region; development, at best, would take a back-seat within counterinsurgency. As president, Lyndon Johnson would look to the development of the Mekong as a grand international gesture, one which he hoped would challenge the direction the war was otherwise headed in. He found the Mekong development project stagnated, however, as development was placed on the backburner during the Kennedy administration.

Counterinsurgency in Action

Kennedy needed something to show for his investment in 1962. As money and military advisers poured into South Vietnam under the guise of project *Beef-Up*, new policies were formulated. Counterinsurgency would shape up to be a strategy of deprivation. The most blatant example of this was Operation *Ranch Hand*, which had undergone testing throughout 1961. Beginning in January of 1962, *Ranch Hand* missions began flying throughout the country,

³³ "Mekong Basin Development Research Project," (February, 1962), Kennedy Papers, James C. Thomson Personal Papers, Box 20.

³⁴ "Mekong project," Memorandum from Chester Bowles to the president (January 25, 1962), Kennedy Papers, James C. Thomson Personal Papers, Box 20.

dumping herbicides throughout the countryside in an effort to poison food crops and strip the land of foliage in which guerrillas sought cover. By 1970, one million pounds of herbicides would be dropped on more than four million acres of the country the U.S. sought to defend.³⁵ ‘Agent Orange,’ the most infamous of the herbicides used, rose to notoriety due to its effects on the Vietnamese people. It is claimed that as many as 3 million Vietnamese suffered illnesses due to the vast exposure to the herbicide.³⁶

A more complicated policy of counterinsurgency came to be known as the ‘Strategic Hamlet’ program. The policy, popularized by Roger Hilsman in his February 1962 report entitled “A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam,” had actually been on the minds of the South Vietnamese government for nearly a year. Introduced in the spring of 1961 by British counterinsurgency advisor Robert Thompson, and based on his experiences in Malaya and the Philippines, the goal of the Strategic Hamlet program would be to separate the VC and NLF from their ultimate prize: the rural peasant population. This would be achieved by relocating these populations into smaller, fortified villages, protecting them from the insurgents who looked to recruit or terrorize them.

The program proved enticing to Diem, especially considering its commonalities with his previous ‘agroville’ scheme. In addition to depriving insurgents of their sustaining resources, the reorganization of rural peasants was touted as a means of providing them social and economic revolution. This would be accomplished through the work of Civic Action teams, building immense trust in the Diem government. Relocation would prove sizable aspect of these plans, indicating lessons not learned from the failure of the ‘agroville’ attempt.

³⁵ Young, 82.

³⁶ Ben Stocking, “Agent Orange Still Haunts Vietnam, US,” *The Washington Post*, June 14, 2007. *Ranch Hand’s* cruel motto was “Only We Can Prevent Forests.”

In his “Strategic Concept” report, Hilsman provided an answer to this. Only the “[s]uitably hardy, loyal and tough villagers” were to be relocated – whatever that meant. Just as Kenneth Young had wrongly assumed years earlier, policy planners again believed that Vietnamese peasants would be easily enticed to willingly move from at-risk areas with a combination of GVN might, ideological solidarity, and American funds to sweeten the deal. Respecting the ‘Strategic’ aspect of the Hamlets, these fortified villages would serve the GVN best on the Laotian and Cambodian borders.³⁷ Regarding Strategic Hamlet fortifications, Hilsman’s report went much further than Thompson’s recommendations, which called for meager defenses: ‘bamboo shoots and moats.’ Strategic hamlets reinforced by the U.S. would be protected by a ditch and a fence of barbed wire, and would include:

[O]ne or more observation towers, guard posts, and a defense post for central storage of arms. The area immediately around the village will be cleared for fields of fire and the area approaching the clearing ... strewn with booby-traps (spikes, pits, explosives, etc.) and other personnel obstacles.³⁸

Protected inside the Hamlets, peasants would be able to live unmolested, and thus not challenged with the prospect of shielding the VC; meanwhile, outside the Hamlets in “free-fire zones,” insurgents would be flushed into the open.

Hilsman’s report was the culmination of months’ worth of research into counterinsurgency. Additionally, it inadvertently served to catch up with Diem’s efforts. Diem’s brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, had been softly implementing early strategic hamlet plans since at least as early as November of 1961. Only a day after Hilsman circulated his report, the program had officially begun: Diem

³⁷ This, despite a national intelligence estimate from October 1961 which reported that “80-90% of the estimated 17,000 VC had been locally recruited, and that there was little evidence that the VC relied on external supplies.” Amongst civilian and military policymakers alike, the delusion that VC could *only* be sustained by substantial supplying and coordination from the north still tainted their planning. See: *Pentagon Papers*, 98.

³⁸ “Paper Prepared by the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman),” *FRUS*, 1961–1963, Volume II, Vietnam, 1962, ed. Glenn W. LaFantasie (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1990), Document 42. Hereby cited as “A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam,” *FRUS*.

established the Interministerial Committee for Strategic Hamlets, with Nhu placed in charge. “A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam” also proposed operation *Sunrise* in order to test the Strategic Hamlet policy, and was undertaken the following month, in March of 1962. According to Michael Forrestal, then Assistant to the President for Far Eastern Affairs, the claims that the Hamlets would really serve as concentration camps, in which peasants were forcibly relocated, originated with this initial Operation under Nhu’s direction. Looking back, Forrestal called the Strategic Hamlet program “one of the worst mistakes that ha[d] ever been made in Vietnam.” Yet in the moment, during operation *Sunrise*, success seemed all but assured. As the Pentagon historian for the Operation recalls, when ARVN forces arrived to “liberate” peasants of the NLF-held Ben Cat district, the VC “simply melted into the jungles.”³⁹

What Hilsman, Forrestal, and others of the U.S. mission did not know at the time was that, though \$300,000 worth of funds were appropriated for the purpose of the relocation (which included expenses to build new homes and public facilities), Nhu chose to withhold the funds until “loyalty” could be assured amongst the peasants. Even following these assurances, those relocated under and after operation *Sunrise* were forced to pay the South Vietnamese government for reconstruction materials. Early reports also suggested that less than 35% of families relocated willingly. These figures were largely ignored. As Nhu embezzled American aid, Vietnamese peasants began to associate U.S. troops with forcible relocation and government harassment.⁴⁰

Like Diem, Nhu saw controlling the rural population of his country as paramount to remaining in power. This shared concern, however, was complimented by an open disdain towards American intervention. Historians have connected the Ngo Dinh family’s disdain with their

³⁹ “A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam,” *FRUS*; Kaiser, 171; Young, 82; Michael V. Forrestal, recorded interview by Joseph Kraft, August 14, 1964, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

⁴⁰ Michael V. Forrestal, recorded interview by Joseph Kraft, August 14, 1964, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program; Young, 82-3; Kahin, 141.

conception of “self-sufficiency,” inherent to their “personalist” doctrine. Yet in a 1958 interview given to *La Vie Française*, Nhu provided what could be considered more practical reasons for frustration in joint projects with Americans. Regarding USOM projects in agriculture, Nhu stated,

[the government of South Vietnam] find that the development of our economy suffers from American slowness. We should prefer to form a committee of experts from all nations, in which USOM would have nothing but financial control of the funds [provided] ... Having all responsibility in one single body paralyzes it.⁴¹

Though ostensibly speaking on only agricultural affairs four years prior, Nhu laid out in this interview his concerns of sharing power with U.S. missions. The Strategic hamlets, therefore, were too precious a form of control to be hindered by ‘American slowness.’ With U.S. funds for the Hamlets contingent upon ‘success,’ Nhu aimed to work both fast and alone: before *Sunrise* even took place, Washington received a report that nearly 800 Hamlets had been erected.⁴²

Regarding security, observation towers and barbed wire no doubt depicted concentration camps. Hilsman’s report called for “physical security” first and foremost, and dealt not only with strategic hamlets, but with their protection. Amongst other measures, Hilsman took up the issue of the ineffective Civil Guard. He was no doubt aware of Lansdale’s assessment of the early forms of the Civil Guard, which rightly pointed out that it did not effectively engage rural communities. With severely limited mobility, these units could not assure wide populations of government-provided safety; meanwhile, their weak armaments assured little capacity to protect their resident populations.

Hilsman agreed that while a lack of mobility posed a problem within all GVN forces, the prospect of leaving rural villages unprotected was of greater concern. His plan recommended increasing the Civil Guard forces and cutting their training time in half, and in general promoted

⁴¹ Montgomery, 79.

⁴² Kaiser, 171.

further outreach into rural areas. Hilsman argued that there was utility in this static defense force which would deny the Viet Cong access to supplies and protection, and place the safety of villagers at the forefront of GVN operations. Civil Guards responding to subversion would have smaller distances to travel, and would benefit from a buffer zone provided by “Defended Villages,” which would line the periphery of Viet Cong controlled territory and defend the hamlets within.⁴³

Counterinsurgency, now delivered in the form of the Strategic Hamlet policy, called for an increase in all GVN forces. When the ‘Strategic Concept’ report was circulated, Civic Action teams, composed of 17-18 cadre, numbered 30-40.⁴⁴ The Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the State Department believed 200 were necessary, and considered these teams “the single most important element in eliminating the Viet Cong.” However, though Civic Action teams were meant to engage the populations in order to aid development, construction, and ultimately “build the essential socio-political base,” the report also foresaw the need to build up all GVN forces. Though Civil Guard and Self Defense Corps numbers were already set to rise during 1962 thanks to *Beef-Up*, Hilsman found their projected growth unsatisfactory. A projected Civil Guard increase by 5,000 from its current force of 67,000 was deemed too low: Hilsman’s report called for a total force of 130,000, or a near-doubling. Even more so, the Self Defense Corps, at its current strength of 56,000, needed to be bolstered to 150,000. In holding strategic hamlets, force would be first and foremost.⁴⁵

Hilsman reported in April of 1962 that 150-200 hamlets had been completed, and that province chiefs were boasting even greater advances in the new year. The descriptions were

⁴³ “A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam,” *FRUS*.

⁴⁴ According to “A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam,” these would include: 3 public administrators, 1 youth activities planner, 2-3 police members, 1 public information member, 1 agricultural credit member, 1 medical technician, 1 education specialist, 1 intelligence specialist, 1 Civil Guard liaison, and 5 Self Defense Corps members in training.

⁴⁵ “A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam,” *FRUS*.

optimistic. With the establishment of new village councils, “gifts of medicine, clothing, and rice,” and the restraint of officials to not take reprisals against villagers who once supported the VC, villages had remained free of communist control for months. The undue optimism in such an early report depicts the secrecy, false reporting, and “rapid execution” with which Nhu implemented the Hamlets. By September, over 3,200 Hamlets had been constructed, with over 2,200 on the way. Those completed housed nearly 5 million dislocated peasants, or about 34% of South Vietnam.⁴⁶

In July of 1962, possibly in coordination with the Kennedy administration, U. Alexis Johnson published “Internal Defense and the Foreign Service” in the *Foreign Service Journal* to outline the balance of civilian and military operations necessary to the success of counterinsurgency. Having served as U.S. Ambassador to Czechoslovakia from 1953-1958, then to Thailand until 1961, the Deputy Undersecretary of State was considered an experienced civilian voice on the subject of communist insurgency. In this short piece, he warned, “under present circumstances the threat [developing] countries face is now not so much invasion from without as destruction from within.” U.A. Johnson called for a comprehensive response, to achieve a resistance to subversion “all-inclusive in scope.” Notably, he emphasized the evolving roles and overall promise of civilian agencies in strengthening vulnerable communities in developing nations. He framed their potential in a post-Marshall Plan context, arguing that American aid must not be purely economic but also attuned to “the roots of subversion and insurgency as toward its overt manifestations.” Counterinsurgency required expert coordination between and a balance of both civilian and military measures.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ “Hilsman to Harriman: Implementation of an Effective Strategic Concept for SVN,” correspondence (April, 1962), Kennedy Papers, Roger Hilsman papers, Box 3; Nighswonger, 62-63. At the time, South Vietnam’s population was estimated at 14-15 million.

⁴⁷ U. Alexis Johnson, “Internal Defense in the Foreign Service,” *Foreign Service Journal* (July 1962): 21-22.

The Deputy Undersecretary's proclamation that "it will always be too late if resort must be had to military measures" seems sensible. However, it was U.A. Johnson who less than a year prior had advocated that 20,000-25,000 troops be dispatched to the Vietnamese Central Highlands. Moreover, key counterinsurgency projects such as Operation *Ranch Hand* and the Strategic Hamlet program were taking on a heavily militarized nature. Hilsman's 'Strategic Concept' report called for both military and civilian advisers to successfully implement the strategic hamlets – yet with a near 10:1 personnel ratio, military advising was sure to outbalance civilian input. Despite the evident contradictions, "Internal Defense and the Foreign Service" served as a precursor to the administration's formal counterinsurgency document, which arrived in the form of NSAM no. 182: "Counterinsurgency Doctrine."⁴⁸

NSAM no. 182 emphasized America's role in local wars of communist subversion as strictly advisory, serving ultimately to support a nation's rise to stable autonomy. This role would consist mostly of "assistance," though this assistance specifically aimed to minimize both "the likelihood of direct U.S. military involvement" as well as "the risk of escalation from subversive insurgency."⁴⁹ U.S. counterinsurgency policy towards South Vietnam (and theoretically other countries embroiled in communist insurgency) again struck a delicate middle ground, intending to prevent the escalation of both sides. Something would have to give. Amidst a backdrop of crisis, in southeast Asia the Kennedy administration in 1961 had proven uninterested in negotiations. Though 1962 began with moderate success, the situation would again deteriorate, and by the fall of that year David Halberstam would label South Vietnam "a crisis seeking recognition."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Ibid; "A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam," *FRUS*.

⁴⁹ Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. National Security Files. Meetings and Memoranda. National Security Action Memoranda [NSAM]: NSAM 182, Counterinsurgency Doctrine.

⁵⁰ Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*, 137.

The counterinsurgency memoranda proved to be a mixed bag. It called for serious civilian operations under subsection b., ‘Methods of Support.’ Eight initiatives – land reform, civic action, community development, social projects, education, labor and youth, leader groups, and diplomatic – easily lent themselves to the guise of development.⁵¹ But in an atmosphere characterized by *Ranch Hand*, strategic hamlets, and *Beef-Up*, it’s hard to imagine how these initiatives would have taken priority. Security came first, and as counterinsurgency policy in actuality reinforced the need for military operations on the ground. The U.S. military mission came to articulate its criticisms of the civilian mission and its goals; “hearts and minds” would have to wait. 1962 saw increased military operations by the ARVN, with a dramatic shift in the role U.S. advisers played. Regarding U.A. Johnson’s “Internal Defense and the Foreign Service,” by 1962, it was ‘too late’ for South Vietnam.

Substituting Support with Force

At the outset of 1962, the State Department estimated Viet Cong strength within South Vietnam at 12,600 regular forces, 13,300 irregular forces, and 100,000 supporters and sympathizers. With these numbers, it appeared the armed wing of the VC had nearly tripled since early 1960, collecting some 9,000 forces since late 1961. Despite these gains, GVN forces still maintained a greater than 2:1 superiority, even more so when discounting VC supporters and sympathizers. With more American training, GVN forces in total were expected to surpass 450,000 by January 1963.⁵² Yet project *Beef-Up* sought to boost not only force numbers, but morale.

⁵¹ Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. National Security Files. Meetings and Memoranda. National Security Action Memoranda [NSAM]: NSAM 182, Counterinsurgency Doctrine.

⁵² “A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam,” *FRUS*; Young, 75-81; Kaiser, 159.

Having struggled throughout 1961, the Kennedy administration determined that the following year would be decisive, and that increases in personnel and equipment would accomplish this.

To this end, *Beef-Up* nearly tripled the number of U.S. advisers in South Vietnam by the end of 1962. It also procured hundreds of armored personnel carriers and military aircrafts. Even before *Beef-Up* was announced, in early December of 1961 two U.S. helicopter companies – 400 men and 33 H-21C helicopters – had made their way to the country.⁵³ Two months later, the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) to Vietnam was replaced with the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). Four-star General Paul Harkins took over from three-star general Lionel G. McGarr⁵⁴ and quickly established himself as a commander of gumption, eager to apply all new sources of force at his disposal. Responding to a question on the political consequences of napalm, Harkins enthusiastically that it “really puts the fear of God into the Viet Cong ... and that is what counts.” Likewise, Hilsman professed enthusiasm over the new shows of force in South Vietnam. With their “fantastic mobility,” helicopters “[r]oaring in over the treetops ... were a terrifying sight to the superstitious Viet Cong peasants.” These statements, coupled with an increase in more daring search-and-destroy missions, contributed to the idea of “early 1962.” In early 1962, American shock and awe caused greater VC retreats. Washington construed interpreted these retreats as clear GVN victories. “Early 1962” falsely convinced U.S. policymakers that military proliferation *could* make up for political shortcomings.⁵⁵

⁵³ Neil Sheehan, Hedrick Smith, E.W. Kenworthy, and Fox Butterfield, *The Pentagon Papers* (New York: The New York Times Company, 1971), 109. Hereby cited as *The Pentagon Papers* (physical).

⁵⁴ “Splithead” McGarr, who replaced Sam Williams as commander of MAAG in late 1960, quickly became disliked in South Vietnam. Characterized as a stubborn shut-in, he resisted counterinsurgency efforts and especially the Strategic Hamlet program originally proposed by Robert Thompson, concerned it would oppose the much-needed “offensive spirit” already-lacking within GVN forces. See Ricks, 226.

⁵⁵ Gelb with Betts, 80; Kahin, 140.

With Harkins at his side, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara visited the country to assess the progress of operation *Sunrise* in the spring of 1962, the kickoff to the strategic hamlet program. Halberstam remembered that, throughout the trip, as well as during many other visits, McNamara served as the optimistic, innovative face of U.S. policy in the country. As a civilian leading the Department of Defense, McNamara was poised to offer insight into the whole of counterinsurgency. Visiting the results of *Sunrise*, his questions about the Operation served to catalog the process: “How much of this? How much of that? Were they happy here?” Known for thinking in statistics and quantifying ideas, McNamara’s third question was striking. It’s hard to determine whether he cared that much about, as Ed Lansdale would later put it, how the people *felt*. Halberstam took a cynical tone:

[McNamara] epitomized booming American technological success, he scurried around Vietnam, looking for what he wanted to see; and he never saw nor smelled nor felt what was really there, right in front of him ... the McNamara trips became part of a vast unwitting and elaborate charade, the institutionalizing and legitimizing of a hopeless lie.

So much “a slave of his own background,” Halberstam believed McNamara was predisposed to never fully grasp the political realities of the countryside during his visits.⁵⁶ His constant accompaniment by Harkins only assured the perpetuation of this “charade.” Once called “an unmitigated disaster” and “totally insensitive to all the political considerations [of the countryside],”⁵⁷ an aide to later-Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. made clear that civilian officials who worked within the country feared the appointment of Harkins. To them, he signified the prevailing mentality of force that U.S. policy was bending to, which was no substitute for the inherently-political struggle for Vietnam.

⁵⁶ David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972), 248.

⁵⁷ Ricks, 229.

In early 1962, correspondent Bernard Fall perceived a new strategy of counterinsurgency being employed by the U.S. in South Vietnam. Whereas traditionally in revolutionary wars “popular support” was considered paramount in defeating insurgents, U.S. policy now intended to substitute this with technological innovations and tactical prowess. To further his point, he cited two major civilian policy planners who had long concerned themselves with the issue of “popular support,” albeit superficially.⁵⁸ During his June 1961 speech at Fort Bragg, Rostow had not only touted his “take-off” theory and the need for programs of “development, communications, and indoctrination,” but simultaneously cast serious doubt on how vital local support was in sustaining guerrilla movements:

... I am sometimes lectured that this or that government within the free world is not popular; they tell me that guerrilla warfare cannot be won unless the peoples are dissatisfied. These are, at best, half-truths.⁵⁹

Similarly, in a preface to the 1962 English edition of South Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap’s *People’s War, People’s Army*, Hilsman claimed that “[g]uerrillas do not need majority support from the entire countryside. They can operate effectively even if some of the populace is hostile and the rest indifferent.”⁶⁰ Considering the distinction of policy approaches, as well as testimony from both missions, it is apparent that 1962 was a year of technological and tactical innovations. Any importance placed on “popular support,” essentially the political struggle, was sure to fall to the wayside.

The introduction of helicopters was intended to give GVN forces what Halberstam called a “booster shot,” as well as increase the effectiveness of search-and-destroy missions. An excellent

⁵⁸ Fall, “The Stakes in Southeast Asia,” in *Viet-Nam Witness*, 264. Fall writes: “In any case, both views are being put extensively to the test in South Viet-Nam today. Victory or defeat in that war, therefore, will influence the West’s over-all position in most underdeveloped areas where Communist-inspired revolutionary war is likely to challenge it.”

⁵⁹ W.W. Rostow, “Guerrilla Warfare Underdeveloped Areas,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 46, no. 1 (January 1962).

⁶⁰ Fall, “The Stakes in Southeast Asia,” in *Viet-Nam Witness*, 264.

example of both technological and tactical innovation, helicopters would enable the ARVN and Civil Guards to conduct high-power attacks on VC forces with theoretically less advance planning, fewer casualties, and an overwhelming superiority. Still, Halberstam observed that by the summer of 1962, the introduction of helicopters “had not altered the nature of the war or the enemy’s techniques.” Instead, the VC were simply “caught off guard” and, according to officials like Harkins and Hilsman, prone to retreat quicker than they had the previous year.⁶¹

Helicopters may have played an even smaller role than policymakers wanted to believe. *The Pentagon Papers* history reports that the first U.S. helicopter downed by enemy forces occurred in early February of 1962, less than two months after their arrival.⁶² Additionally, like any technology introduced to the Vietnamese countryside, helicopters were bound to become commonplace. VC forces proved adaptive not only learning to down these helicopters over time but retreat at their arrival, as helicopters came to indicate the coming of ground forces protected by armed personnel carriers. The sound of the helicopters in many cases aided the VC in preserving their forces.

Surely, the VC spent the first half of 1962 adjusting to the new firepower with which GVN forces commanded. As the year continued, the VC largely abandoned battalion-sized. Naturally, U.S. advisers and policymakers interpreted this optimistically. In reality, the VC were shifting their own tactics, carrying out attacks against outposts and villages. During the second half of 1962, they staged nearly two ambushes per day, most of which occurred in the Mekong Delta region and outside Saigon.⁶³ Despite this shying away from taking on large groups of GVN forces, the VC were still somehow emboldened during this period of expanded American commitment.

⁶¹ Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire*, 136.

⁶² *The Pentagon Papers* (physical), 109.

⁶³ Kaiser, 158.

For example, while conducting a sweep of the Mekong Delta in early October, an ARVN Division came in contact with a VC Battalion. As Halberstam put it, the VC Battalion changed their tactics: “they stood and fought instead of fleeing, and decimated the Ranger company.”⁶⁴

It is not perplexing to determine how the VC could have felt emboldened against such a backdrop of increased U.S. aid and presence. In early 1962, military commanders, including Harkins, circulated a series of papers entitled “Lessons Learned.” Within these documents, it was discovered that U.S.-supported operations in the countryside were generally failing. Of thirteen operations from March through June, only two were deemed “successful.” The rest ranged between finding no VC, to encountering small VC forces and causing only token casualties. Furthermore, despite the manpower and equipment that *Beef-Up* supposedly furnished, GVN forces were failing to pursue the enemy. Around this time also arose the phenomenon of fake body counts, in which GVN forces would conduct search-and-destroy raids, fail to pursue the enemy or survey battlefield casualties, and concoct an unverifiable number of VC wounded and killed to report to their superiors.⁶⁵

The VC may have directly benefitted from the newly-furnished GVN forces. During 1961, morale became a concern for good reason: when GVN forces retreated, they left behind weapons of a quality which the VC otherwise did not have access to. In the first six months of 1962, GVN forces lost 2,588 weapons to the VC. In comparison to the loss rate of 1961, this was an improvement; moreover, GVN forces collected nearly as many weapons from the VC as they surrendered during that period. Still, GVN weapons provided by U.S. aid were more technologically advanced, ultimately leveling the conflict as the VC upgraded their armaments. Weapons surrendered also allowed the VC to prioritize more important commodities (such as

⁶⁴ Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire*, 137.

⁶⁵ Kaiser, 157-160.

heavy artillery and much-needed medications) that were shipped in costly supply convoys from North Vietnam.⁶⁶

As the VC changed their strategy to attack outposts and villages more often than GVN forces, they encountered the effects of the Strategic Hamlet program. During operation *Sunrise*, 205 families had been relocated, the majority of them forcibly. Upon their reestablishment, it was found that 120 males of arms-bearing age resided in the new community. Forcible relocation not only aided VC recruitment, but rendered communities already emotionally decimated unable to defend themselves in the face of insurgency.⁶⁷ In *Fire in the Lake*, Frances Fitzgerald argued that this factor compounded aspects of the new Hamlets which were indisputably un-strategic. The program planners had assumed that spread out villages in the countryside were naturally unorganized and therefore required consolidation to introduce order. This assumption, which Fitzgerald contended was far from the truth, trapped peasants relocated in strategic hamlets. Concentrated in a small area, walled in with barbed wire and spikes, peasant populations were never easier to encircle and infiltrate. As the GVN forces over-reported VC kills to tout progress in the conflict, so too did Nhu when measuring their Strategic Hamlet success. In hastily relocating Vietnamese throughout the countryside, Diem's government cut many important corners; namely, security. An American survey at the end of 1962 found that less than 10% of the 'completed' strategic hamlets possessed any military defense at all.⁶⁸

In as early as June of 1962, all of these factors were coming together to spell out defeat for GVN forces. Writing for the *New York Times*, Homer Bigart reported on the VC using an "old ruse" to deal an effective defeat to GVN forces. The incident culminated in a raid on a district

⁶⁶ Fall, "The Stakes in Southeast Asia," in *Viet-Nam Witness*, 263.

⁶⁷ Kahin, 141.

⁶⁸ Fitzgerald, 165-167.

government headquarters in the Delta, in which guerrilla forces, having burned government buildings and kidnapped several officials, killed fifteen Civil Guards and three civilians. The ‘ruse’ began with a diversionary force: 100 VC attacked an outpost four miles outside of town. Reacting as expected, the district chief dispatched the Civil Guards, at which point “the Communists struck against the weakened defenses and overran the town. They cut all roads and blocked canals by sinking barges in them.” An air attack by GVN forces was quickly ordered, though it is unclear if they actually pursued the enemy as it retreated. Helicopters were also called in, but arrived too late. In their escape, the VC had made off with “considerable plunder” – over 30 firearms of varying capabilities, and several radios.⁶⁹

Strategic hamlets were bound to be poorly defended, if at all. While Harkins and Hilsman agreed on many concerns regarding GVN force, an area in which they disagreed was the most effective form of defense. Harkins, like the generals before and after him, was relatively unconcerned with counterinsurgency priorities. In his mind, clearing and holding territory meant nothing if the enemy retreated further and further each time. Furthermore, those who advocated for search-and-destroy missions in 1962 were well-received. Considering the chaos of 1961 and the persisting unwillingness by GVN forces to truly take the fight to the enemy, Washington deferred to mobile operations in an effort to turn the tide of the conflict. Looking back on the strategic hamlet program, Harkins recalled that the program “didn’t really start” until some point in 1963.⁷⁰ This seems odd, as Nhu routinely publicized his ambition to create over 6,000 strategic

⁶⁹ Homer Bigart, “18 KILLED IN RAID BY VIETNAM REDS: Guerrillas Kidnap Officials After Ruse Succeeds,” *The New York Times*, June 6, 1962. Bigart also covered the strategic hamlets very closely, including operation *Sunrise*. In late 1962, he would uncover the systematic poor conditions in which families were forcibly relocated, as well as the compulsory labor they were made to endure under the program. Prior to operation *Sunrise*, having stirred controversy with his reporting on a coup attempt against the Diem family, Bigart received orders from the South Vietnamese government to leave the country. The U.S. Embassy apparently managed to have these orders rescinded.

⁷⁰ Paul D. Harkins, recorded interview by Ted Gittinger, November 10, 1981, The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

hamlets in 1962 alone.⁷¹ And though many were inclined to distrust Nhu, and with good reason, Harkins is continuously depicted as one who followed the line of the Diem family.

It may be that U.S. military advisers simply didn't care about the civilian approach to counterinsurgency. U.S. military personnel admitted that strategic hamlets served a purpose in controlling the civilian population of South Vietnam. But they argued, as they had during the Eisenhower administration, that the litany of GVN paramilitary forces used to defend the hamlets were unnecessary. In order to defeat an insurgent enemy supported by a neighboring country, military advisors rationalized, what was needed was not stationary paramilitary forces but a hard-hitting, conventional army. That strong army in turn would ensure a strong state. Harkins felt this way, as did lower brass personnel. In response to an April memo discussing the implementation of Hilsman's "Strategic Concept," Col. John Stockton wrote Hilsman on the subject of GVN paramilitary forces:

... we are sort of splitting hairs when we differentiate among Civil Guard, Self Defense, and run-of-the-mine regular army units. They are all used in more or less static defense situations, with limited patrolling around their base positions admittedly, but they are not the highly mobile, anywhere – anytime – any mission type of unit which we picture as being the so-called Queen of the Battle in our own Army. I think, if the task were up to me, I would somehow lump these three groups together ...⁷²

Stockton's response summarizes the views of the military mission. Many U.S. military advisors thought paramilitary forces would best serve the GVN as offensive and indistinguishable from the ARVN. MAAG furnished the Civil Guard with slightly advanced weaponry, though also with the mentality of fighting an open conflict. Later, under MACV, early reports of combined Civil Guard and ARVN units successfully repelling VC attacks spurred optimism about military control of the

⁷¹ Kaiser, 172-177.

⁷² Colonel John B. Stockton, "Response by Col. John B. Stockton" (undated), Kennedy Papers, Roger Hilsman papers, Box 3.

forces.⁷³ Under civilian directorship, the Civil Guards were determined ineffective; under military leadership, their defensive orientation was abandoned. By 1964, the Civil Guard had been officially integrated into the ARVN.

Despite this desire for control, in which military training and arming came at the expense of civilian influence, some military personnel held more practical reasons for discounting civilian counterinsurgency operations. Col. John Paul Vann, on the ground in the Delta during 1962, held great respect for Ed Lansdale and his ‘common man’ theory. Vann supported the aid projects which the U.S. implemented alongside his guerrilla war – he simply felt he could get his job done faster. As Sheehan wrote,

Vann thought that it would probably require ten years to create a healthy rural society of satisfied peasants ... impervious to Communist attempts to renew the insurgency. It should not take him more than six months to smash the Main Force and Regional guerrillas in the northern Delta and start this cycle of returning peace...⁷⁴

Still, counterinsurgency programs like the strategic hamlets appeared to obstruct military operations. In late October of 1962, Vann learned that Colonel Cao (who he had been advising in the region) had ordered his troops not to pursue VC Battalions following skirmishes. When Vann complained against Cao, Diem reassured Cao that the Vietnamese colonel had made the right decision. In fact, Diem chided, “[Cao] was taking far too many casualties ... He would have to be more careful; he was listening too much to his American advisers. ... [I]f he wanted a promotion, he would have to be more prudent.”⁷⁵ With the airpower and artillery that *Beef-Up* had introduced to GVN forces that year, Diem felt that the use of infantry was inefficient. Most importantly, Diem in late 1962 was convinced he was winning Vietnamese peasants over, for he was skillfully

⁷³ “Hilsman to Harriman: Implementation of an Effective Strategic Concept for SVN,” correspondence (April, 1962), Kennedy Papers, Roger Hilsman papers, Box 3.

⁷⁴ Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 69.

⁷⁵ Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire*, 95.

separating them from the VC and NLF with his Strategic Hamlet program. With this grand separation, “the sea of guerrilla fish” (a metaphor first employed by Mao) was drying up, and “there was no need to seek out infantry battles.”⁷⁶

In the fall of 1962, a State Department study looked ahead at the prospects in South Vietnam. Optimism from Diem’s government and many U.S. officials was “premature.” “At best,” the study began, “it appears that the rate of deterioration has decelerated.”⁷⁷ Warning signs that the VC were not defeated but adapting were becoming clearer, as were Nhu’s seriously inflated strategic hamlet statistics. Civilian personnel found this concerning; military personnel less so.

Not to Be Liked, But to Be Tough

At the beginning of 1963, the U.S. continued to maintain a significant military advisory presence in South Vietnam – about 11,000 personnel. Sheehan writes that American officers at the time often expressed their views on the seemingly stalemated conflict:

[American officers] hoped that the guerrillas would one day be foolish enough to abandon their skulking ways and fight fairly in a stand-up battle ... No American officer, Vann included, expected to see it fulfilled ... Vann could not help but hope that the guerrillas would someday display such foolhardy temerity. It seemed to be the only way he would ever succeed in annihilating a whole battalion.⁷⁸

Of course, as Halberstam pointed out, as early as October of 1962, the VC were already fighting the occasional “stand-up battle.” When they did, they fared well. In the Mekong Delta especially, that both Halberstam and Sheehan (shadowing Vann) covered, the situation was actually dire. When the VC weren’t making open stands, they were increasing their influence in the region, and continuing to terrorize the peasant populace and run sabotage missions amongst the peasant

⁷⁶ Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 124.

⁷⁷ *The Pentagon Papers* (physical), 155.

⁷⁸ Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 204.

populace. Roads in the Delta were too dangerous to travel at night. If braved during the day, ditches had been dug and bridges destroyed to foil convoys that dared. The VC mobilized peasants in provinces where GVN forces refused to patrol. In May of 1962, according to Sheehan, Vann felt the need to “reverse the trend of war” in the Delta, as the VC “had the strategic and tactical initiative.” In October of 1962, Halberstam proclaimed “the beginning of the end” in the Delta.⁷⁹

The Battle of Ap Bac, fought on January 2, 1963, proved to be a turning point in the VC’s battle against GVN forces. About 350 guerrillas took on 2,000 ARVN soldiers, aided by U.S. personnel and equipment. The battle resulted in comparatively heavy casualties (61 dead, including 3 Americans, and over 100 wounded) and five downed helicopters. Sheehan attributed much of this victory to the training the VC underwent following previous GVN skirmishes. Ap Bac proved the VC had perfected the takedown of helicopters, as well as learned to anticipate and even use U.S. heavy artillery, which was often left behind in battle during the previous two years.⁸⁰

As villages came under NLF control, VC soldiers regularly hid amongst civilians. Napalming and the indiscriminate gunning down of civilians during 1963 increasingly turned the peasant population against the government. As Hilsman and Forrestal reported to Kennedy early in the year, it was impossible to determine just how many of the 20,000 VC killed in 1962 were actually guerrillas, and not civilians.⁸¹ Meanwhile air strikes in 1963 already numbered 1,000 per month.

Their report to Kennedy also called attention to military personnel who had voiced concerns over the defense of strategic hamlets. As internal hamlet security had yet to improve,

⁷⁹ Ibid, 49; Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire*, 95.

⁸⁰ Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, Book III – The Battle of Ap Bac; Herring, 88.

⁸¹ GVN forces likely over-reported VC deaths on a regular basis. While the civilian-guerrilla ratio of 20,000 is unverifiable, so is the number itself. GVN forces likely over-reported VC deaths on a regular basis. While the civilian-guerrilla ratio of 20,000 is unverifiable, so is the number itself.

Hilsman and Forrestal recommended better communication and the prospect of air support for hamlets under siege.⁸² Rather than using the lessons of 1962 to reconsider tactics in 1963, the U.S. advisers continued to resort to indiscriminate firepower against the guerrillas, resulting in ever higher civilian casualties.

Historian George Herring aptly describes that spring as a time when “optimism and uncertainty coexisted uneasily.”⁸³ MACV held the line on the ground that, despite increasingly pessimistic news reports, GVN forces were securing victories. Testing the boundaries of reality, General Harkins proclaimed “a Vietnamese victory. It certainly was.” At a press conference following the battle, Harkins not only varnished over the defeat, but also added that, at the time, GVN soldiers were still in hot pursuit of the VC and requesting artillery and airstrikes. In reality, the exact opposite was true.⁸⁴

This is not to say there were no dissenting views within the military mission. John Paul Vann was the primary naysayer. Vann kept reporters close during operations, reported to them immediately afterwards, and provided documents he felt pertinent to understanding the situation from his perspective. But even higher-ranking officers such as Admiral Harry D. Felt began to doubt the war was going well in 1963. Following an April conference in Honolulu, in which Harkins stated that the conflict could come to a close by Christmas of 1965, Felt expressed doubts that such an early removal of troops was likely. Though Felt held the MACV line in public, he and

⁸² “Memorandum From the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman) and Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to the President,” *FRUS*, 1961–1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January–August 1963, eds. Edward C. Keefer and Louis J. Smith (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1991), Document 19. At the time of the report’s composition, the South Vietnamese government was claiming that over 4,000 strategic hamlets had been constructed. Though Hilsman increasingly proved a supporter of force, the joint report still prioritized using GVN forces in static, defensive positions in hamlets. While Harkins worried these forces weren’t taking the fight to the guerrillas, Hilsman worried of the other side of the coin: depriving the hamlets of key defense forces, and substituting them with air strikes and mass force by request.

⁸³ Herring, 93.

⁸⁴ Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire*, 156; Kaiser, 183.

other advisers likely assessed the continuous build-up under *Beef-Up* against the continuous failings of GVN forces, and concluded that such optimism was not warranted.⁸⁵

Disregard for the GVN losses and tactical failures was not limited to the military mission. Hilsman, when confronted by a reporter during his trip to Saigon with Forrestal in January, disputed a claim that the government was failing in its pacification missions, and that Nhu was not the proper official to implement that program. He replied that “the important thing was not to be liked, but to be tough and get things done.” This dubious notion came from the very man who had a year prior emphasized the importance of socioeconomic progress in peasant villages and building political support for the national government.⁸⁶

Meanwhile, others officials had growing concerns. The political situation in South Vietnam, though largely ignored by many on the ground in the country, was clearly deteriorating. Prominent members of the American Friends of Vietnam (AFV) lobbying group, especially senator Mike Mansfield, were losing faith in Diem. When Diem in April requested the removal of 2,000 military advisers due to issues of “sovereignty,” Ambassador Frederick Nolting instead suggested withholding funds from the country. Nolting realized that the Vietnamese president simply wanted more control over the aid distributed to rural hamlets. In May, the South Vietnamese government aroused greater American dissatisfaction when, on the Buddha’s 2,527th birthday, Diem banned the flying of any flag other than the nation’s. In defiance, Buddhists flew their flags in defiance, and in Hue GVN security forces opened fire on a celebratory crowd, killing nine civilians. Two days later, reacting to thousands of Buddhists protesting the nine deaths, Diem jailed prominent monks and their supporters, declaring them a Communist front organization. The

⁸⁵ “Memorandum From the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Felt) to the Joint Chiefs of Staff,” May 11, 1963. Felt is not the best example of deep-seated dissent as much as growing skepticism. In February, he had publically stated that he believed the war could be won in three years. See: Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire*, 156.

⁸⁶ Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire*, 156.

monks had alerted the foreign press to send photographers to the scene. One particularly disturbing image became a national rallying cry against the Diem government, and alerted the international community of the chaos engulfing the American-backed government in South Vietnam.⁸⁷ No other news from Vietnam did more to provoke anti-war sentiment in the United States. What condition, many wondered, could drive the opposition to such an extreme measure?

During that summer, U.S. support for Diem became ever more precarious. Diem's position on GVN operations – that they should not unnecessarily “sacrifice” units in pursuit of VC – was much to blame for failed offensives such as Ap Bac. MACV struggled to find a way to make the Saigon government more aggressive. As Washington policymakers began to debate serious pressure or a change in government, military advisers privately struggled to support the South Vietnamese president. Fearing that alienating Diem would dash all chances of success in the country, Harkins and other advisers pushed the increasingly incredible MACV line of optimism in the face of military defeats. At the beginning of the 1963, the JCS and military advisers had learned from the Wheeler Mission that the situation was dire. VC forces were now coordinating significantly with North Vietnamese units that were infiltrating the South along the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos and Cambodia. In July, Ho Chi Minh visited Beijing, where Chinese Communists promised him vast material support including 90,000 rifles. As the year progressed, many military advisers and the JCS sought to widen the war to combat these obstacles and strike decisive victories. Sanctions and retaliatory measures (like bombings) against the North were common proposals. Meanwhile, Harkins looked ahead to 1964. Realizing that military assistance

⁸⁷ Young, 94-95.

was set to decrease from \$187 million to \$130 million as *Beef-Up* phased out, he instead proposed an increase to \$234 million.⁸⁸

Richard Betts and Leslie Gelb in *The Irony of Vietnam* described this uncertainty as the *damned if you do, damned if you don't* dilemma. Though Betts and Gelb largely attribute this dilemma to Washington policymakers concerned with Diem and South Vietnam's chances for political stability, it applies to the military mission as well. Despite Diem's sporadic concerns with "sovereignty," he had allowed U.S. military personnel to advise and fight alongside GVN forces, while consistently pressing to increase his own forces. To lose Diem would mean a new government in Saigon, one which could prove even more ineffective and resistant to American assistance. Additionally, members of the GI generation (including Harkins, but going as far back as Williams and Dulles) still believed that a powerful state could only be ushered in with a powerful military. Diem had always wanted such an approach, and for that he was a leader worth keeping. Still, Diem's growing inaction, his reliance on Nhu's oppressive intelligence network, and their counterinsurgency projects all undermined American initiatives. To lose Diem was risky; keeping him involved possibly even more risks.⁸⁹

Many Washington policymakers shared this growing disenchantment. Congressmen, including some members of the AFV, questioned American support of the Diem government, and some even openly entertained the idea of a coup. As Averell Harriman's influence over Vietnam policy grew throughout 1963 (serving first as Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern affairs from January 1961-April 1963, then as Under Secretary of State for political affairs from May 1963-March 1965), Ambassador Nolting detected a shift in the Department's attitude towards Diem.

⁸⁸ "Report by an Investigative Team Headed by the Chief of Staff, United States Army (Wheeler), to the Joint Chiefs of Staff," *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963, eds. Edward C. Keefer and Louis J. Smith (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1991), Document 26; Kaiser, 162 & 187-188.

⁸⁹ Gelb with Betts, Chapter 1, "Patters, Dilemmas, and Explanations."

During his tenure as Ambassador, Nolting had worked loyally to implement Kennedy's instructions in South Vietnam. He publically sought to influence the Diem government not by threats but by praise. Privately, Nolting criticized the "sensational reporting" coming from within the country. He meant to maintain Diem's confidence, as well as save face at home, and took actions like drafting a white paper on "the role of the press" in the country. As the fall approached, Nolting found that the line he'd long held was becoming untenable. As policymakers lost patience with Diem, the priorities of those in the field such as Nolting and Harkins were became those of the old guard.⁹⁰

The change was apparent by late August, when Republican senator Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. replaced Nolting as U.S. ambassador. Less than a month into his appointment, Kennedy tasked Lodge with seriously pressing Diem for reforms. The White House, following an earlier NSC meeting, had drafted 13 proposals for Lodge to present. They included the release of political prisoners, civil treatment of Buddhists and students, press liberalization, confining secret police operations to combatting VC activities, free elections, and the right to assembly. Lodge was given great latitude to push these reforms. As the cablegram laid out, the new Ambassador was specifically authorized "to apply any controls you think helpful for this purpose ... to delay any delivery of supplies or transfer of funds by any agency until you are satisfied that delivery is in U.S. interest." Lodge could also add or subtract from the list of reforms as he wished, keeping in mind that it was not U.S. policy to terminate discontinue aid to South Vietnam.⁹¹

Nonetheless, the transition was complete. With Lodge's appointment, the U.S. abandoned the stance of accommodating Diem, in favor of pressure and the potential for rescinding assistance.

⁹⁰ Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire*, 159; Interview with Frederick Nolting, 1981, WGBH Media Library & Archives.

⁹¹ *The Pentagon Papers* (physical), 206-207.

As the White House made clear to Lodge, the “need to set a psychological tone and image [was] paramount.”⁹² The new ambassador was the right man to fulfill this task. A “shrewd, tough operator,” Halberstam considered him “very much a match for the Ngo family.” He remarked that Lodge quickly came to consider the ruling family inept, and that he listened to and in turn was respected by reporters and U.S. civilian mission personnel.⁹³

Yet only two days after receiving his instructions for reform, Lodge pessimistically replied to the White House: “Frankly, I see no opportunity at all for substantive changes.” The new ambassador couldn’t conceive of aid sanctions that wouldn’t slow the war effort or cause economic collapse. Going forward, he planned to “let [Diem] sweat for awhile” while he waited for the Saigon government to approach him on the subject of reforms and sanctions. However, Lodge did suggest that perhaps the U.S. mission could find “some part of the [US]AID program to hold up,” which would prompt Diem to respond and perhaps initiate some reforms.⁹⁴ This suggestion revealed the new style Lodge brought to his position, rightly dubbed “a crafty Yankee” by Sheehan.⁹⁵ Lodge had been in South Vietnam long enough to understand not only military operations, but civilian as well. He’d spoken to William Flippen and Rufus Phillips, key USAID officials, who’d delivered gloomy reports on the war effort, control of the Mekong Delta, and especially the strategic hamlet program.

Meanwhile, Lodge understood the Ngo Dinh. Civilian projects like the strategic hamlets were close to Diem’s heart for purposes of national prestige and feigned unity, closer still to Nhu’s for purposes of expanding his intelligence network, which oppressed rural populations without engendering either loyalty or control. The strategic hamlets, civic action, and other USAID

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire*, 244-248.

⁹⁴ *The Pentagon Papers* (physical), 208-210.

⁹⁵ Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire*, 248.

programs, if necessary, might serve as excellent leverage if they went on the chopping block. During 1963, the number of strategic hamlets in the country had grown. Though Nhu had fallen behind his personal goal set the previous year, he and Diem reported that by the summer of 1963, the program sheltered two-thirds of the country's population. The rate of construction vastly outpaced what U.S. personnel thought workable, a view held mostly by civilian officials, particularly those of USAID.⁹⁶

Halberstam reported a September 6 NSC meeting in which Major General Victor Krulak and Rufus Phillips, USAID coordinator for the strategic hamlet program, went toe-to-toe over the American "successes" in Vietnam. Though Krulak and Phillips were only two of many briefing the president that day, they represented the conflicting views over the future of the missions in Vietnam. Known for faithfully restating the optimistic line taken by MACV commander Paul Harkins, Krulak reported the shooting war was achieving its goals. He expressed only minor concern over the Nhus but insisted that, "Diem was good. Our man. Respectable."⁹⁷

Phillips, though not alone in dissent that day, was especially primed to poke holes in the MACV line on the war. Though civilian in its conception, the strategic hamlet program had always pursued military objectives. ARVN forces, advised by U.S. military personnel, were charged with relocating populations into new hamlets. Once there, Civil Guards and Self Defense Corps provided security, a process known as clear-and-hold. Civilian assistance, in the forms of civic action, USAID personnel, and American dollars, lagged behind these military priorities, since the mindset which had long governed U.S. counterinsurgency, security first, remained paramount. Under *Beef-Up*, search-and-destroy missions replaced the static defensive mindset of clear-and-

⁹⁶ Nighswonger, 62. At the outset of the program, Nhu had intended to place two-thirds of the country's population (roughly 10 million) in completed hamlets by December 1962.

⁹⁷ Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 277.

hold operations. Though this may have meant more VC killed, it slowly depleted hamlets of their defense forces. Already hastily built by Nhu, completed hamlets in 1962-1963 became easy targets for NLF and VC infiltrators. When defenses forces were present, they often performed poorly. And since those defenders were now trained primarily by the U.S. military mission, the blame could no longer fall on civilian personnel such as the Michigan State University Group (MSUG).⁹⁸ By the fall of 1963, the U.S. military deserved significant blame for the failures of the strategic hamlet program.

Halberstam lauded Phillips' testimony that day as being "the first frontal attack upon the military reporting ... a remarkable moment in the American bureaucracy, a moment of intellectual honesty." Phillips agreed with those at the September 6 NSC meeting who believed a change in the Saigon government was needed. Many leading Vietnamese shared that view. He also called into question the military's focus of reporting, as he and other civilian officers firmly believed Vietnam to be a political, not military, war, even though militarily, Phillips held, it was being lost. U.S. soldiers were unreliable in assessing the political situation as they were ordered not to discuss politics with the forces they advised. Essentially, Phillips contended that MACV itself wasn't suited to report on the entirety of the insurgency in South Vietnam. While MACV relied largely on the successes achieved near Saigon, the Mekong Delta region in August alone had lost nearly fifty hamlets to VC forces. As another example, Phillips had discovered a report by civilian officer Earl Young from the province of Long An in which he stated that VC forces controlled 80% of the province. What was worrying was not only such a glaring statistic, but that Young claimed a

⁹⁸ By mid-1959, the MSUG possessed the authority to train only small paramilitary forces in South Vietnam, like the SDC. In February of 1962, Diem terminated the Group's contract, ending 7 years of civilian advising fraught with obstacles.

military report echoed these findings. Prepared by Young's military counterpart in the province, MACV had yet to acknowledge its existence.⁹⁹

The NSC meeting showcased the divide over U.S. missions and future prospects in South Vietnam. Jumping to Phillips' defense, Averell Harriman, then-Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, called Krulak a "damn fool." Krulak's takeaway was anything but open-minded: the major who had authored the Long An report contradicting MACV received a bad efficiency report and transferred to a meaningless National Guard post. Had Lodge not defended the Phillips and Young, MACV would have charged the two with security violations.¹⁰⁰

Halberstam reported that Phillips' testimony carried the day. Yet by late 1963, Phillips' cause was a dying one. Calling attention to the failures of the strategic hamlet program had little impact. Meanwhile, the U.S. military effort in Vietnam had long faltered under the pattern outlined by Betts and Gelb. Citing the French Indochina War a decade prior, the two asserted that though French and Saigon forces continued to improve, they "never got good enough." The Viet Minh and North Vietnamese handily defended them time after time, and the French struggled on only with increased amounts of U.S. aid. As one cynical French official remarked, "The U.S. pays the bulls, we supply the blood."¹⁰¹

The U.S. now found itself in a similar conflict. Adopting a war of attrition required aid with no notion of how much would be enough to break the back of the insurgency. According to Betts and Gelb, a lack of political cohesion was sure to exacerbate these needs, while ultimately predetermining a U.S. much as the French experienced. Under *Beef-Up*, the U.S. sought to extend more power and more control to GVN forces. Both initiatives failed, as losses mounted. As Diem

⁹⁹ Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 278-279.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 279-80.

¹⁰¹ Gelb with Betts, Chapter 1, "Patterns, Dilemmas, and Explanations."

dithered, the NLF retained the strategic initiative. Diem's claim of achieving political cohesion was a fantasy: strategic hamlets uprooted peasants, endangered them, and aided VC terror and recruitment. By the fall of 1963, U.S. policy in South Vietnam resembled an "empty shell."¹⁰² A lack of political cohesion and popular support persisted despite increases in military resources.

Little Dienbienphus

The September 6 NSC meeting which culminated in the Phillips-Krulak showdown left Kennedy at sea. Following the meeting, he dispatched McNamara and Taylor to compile yet another joint report on the situation in South Vietnam. A month later, they delivered their findings to the president. First and foremost, the report stated that "[t]he military campaign has made great progress and continues to progress." Despite the report's boast of graduated withdrawal – that the military advisory effort would be complete by 1965, and that 1,000 advisers would return home within two months for Christmas – it advised that further hamlet construction must be contingent upon raising even greater numbers of GVN forces. The conflict was not drawing to a close, though Taylor and McNamara believed America's participation in it was. Strategic hamlets had sown little in the way of political cohesion; even as their effectiveness depended ever more on a powerful military. Security would have to come first, especially in the Mekong Delta region. Meanwhile, building popular support would take a backseat to military operations.¹⁰³

The report proposed suspending USAID loans aimed at financing large-scale waterworks and electric power projects in the country to "impress upon Diem our disapproval of his political program." Drawing from Nolting's idle and Lodge's actual threats, civilian development became

¹⁰² Gelb with Betts, 10.

¹⁰³ "Memorandum From the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Taylor) and the Secretary of Defense (McNamara) to the President," *FRUS*, 1961–1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, August–December 1963, eds. Edward C. Keefer (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1991), Document 167.

the U.S. mission's prime leverage. The report also recommended more civic action programs within the growing strategic hamlets. This recommendation suggested that Washington policymakers *still* did not understand the full extent of Diem and Nhu's ineffective operations in the countryside. Civic action throughout the Kennedy years had remained a buzzword. What in theory sounded promising, that indigenous community workers would build solidarity between dislocated peasants and their government, proved fatuous in practice. Civic action workers extracted bribes, withheld U.S. aid, assisted Nhu's oppressive intelligence apparatus, and contributed little to the development of the new hamlet communities. Their presence was unwelcomed and toxic.¹⁰⁴

The Taylor-McNamara report ignored Phillips' concerns over the U.S. military's unsubstantiated reports of success. Instead, Taylor and McNamara's essentially confirmed Harkins' VC strength estimate from the month prior, that irregular forces amounted to nearly 100,000 and hard core forces to near 20,000. The joint report indicated a "generally favorable military picture," despite confirming that during the spring and summer of 1963 the VC had managed to grow. An indicators chart from the report also proved less favorable. GVN forces continued to lose weapons in increasing numbers, surrendering 720 in August alone. At the rates found in the report, GVN forces in the second half of 1963 were well on their way to losing more than double those lost in the first half of 1962. Besides GVN material losses, the chart indicated that the VC maintained strategic superiority. VC forces overwhelmingly initiated operations small and large while their overall attacks continued unabated at the time of the report's compilation.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Ibid; Young, 61.

¹⁰⁵ "Memorandum From the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Taylor) and the Secretary of Defense (McNamara) to the President," *FRUS*, 1961–1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, August–December 1963, eds. Edward C. Keefer (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1991), Document 167; Fall, "The Stakes in Southeast Asia," in *Viet-Nam Witness*, 263; Kaiser, 158.

The situation in Vietnam had deteriorated to such an extent by November of 1963 that the Kennedy administration authorized a coup. Much to its surprise the conspirators killed Diem and his brother Nhu on November 2. That same month, USAID acknowledged that Nhu had severely inflated the completed strategic hamlet numbers. Supposedly, that month 8,544 hamlets were completed, with 1,051 under construction. If true, these numbers represented more than half of the entire project completed; still, somehow, Nhu boasted that 85% of the targeted population were in these new hamlets. Yet in April of 1964, USAID revised those numbers downward: 6,562 hamlets completed, 782 under construction, and only 55% of the targeted population in completed hamlets.¹⁰⁶

That spring would also see the departure of Roger Hilsman from the State Department. In his resignation letter, Hilsman lamented,

In the past, the GVN sought to blanket the whole country with so-called strategic hamlets which in many cases involved nothing more than wire-enclosed villages doused with political propaganda, with the Viet Cong agents left in place. The result was to blanket the Delta with little Dienbienphus—indefensible, inadequately armed hamlets far from reinforcements, that lacked both governmental benefits and police facilities to winkle out Communist sympathizers, with Viet Cong pockets left behind. In effect these were storage places of arms for the Viet Cong which could be seized at any time.

In this grand realization, the American architect of the strategic hamlets decried the failure of the “oil blot” strategy of U.S. counterinsurgency. He placed that failure on the search-and-destroy operations. Counterinsurgency developed in the “A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam” report recommended an “oil blot” strategy, in which hamlets would extend to cover the whole of the countryside, thus depriving insurgents of territory, resources, and populations. This became the basis for clear-and-hold. Unfortunately, search-and-destroy operations looked similar, as they continuously extended outwards, working to deprive the VC of safe havens.. Yet the U.S. military

¹⁰⁶ Nighswonger, 62-63.

constantly argued that static, immobile defense forces were useless, that all should be integrated under the ARVN, and that search-and-destroy missions would win the war. As their arguments became policy, the “oil blot” established under the hamlets dissolved. Clear-and-hold operations were abbreviated to simply clearing.¹⁰⁷

The strategic hamlet program set both missions back in their priorities. Within the U.S. military mission, the strategic hamlets never had priority. At the end of 1962, Taylor had surveyed the progress of the program and discussed it with Nhu. In a report (drafted by Krulak), Taylor rather neutrally reported that he saw “no reason for modifying ... the long-term virtues of the program.” A year after its implementation, the program was now “beginning to mature.” But of the 3,353 hamlets (a number concocted by Nhu) completed at the time of his report, Taylor believed “probably no more than 600 can be viewed as fulfilling the desired characteristics in terms of equipment, defensive works, security forces and, possibly most important, government.”¹⁰⁸ It appears Taylor questioned neither the absence of these factors nor their importance. The military mission had long been aware of the hasty construction and lack of security that had dogged Nhu’s implementation. Upper level officials like Taylor and Krulak knew they were inefficient, but simply didn’t care. Winning “hearts and minds” was never an operating principle of U.S. military policy in South Vietnam. As search-and-destroy operations increased, and advisers and equipment flowed in, they became further distanced from the peasants Americans claimed to defend.

Lyndon Baines Johnson’s ascension to the presidency after Kennedy’s assassination on November 22, 1963, seemed to offer an opportunity to reset American policy. After only two days advisors closest to the war in Vietnam began to get a taste of the “Johnson tone.” That tone pointed

¹⁰⁷ Roger Hilsman, “Hilsman letter of Resignation to Secretary of State,” correspondence (March 14, 1964), Kennedy Papers, James C. Thomson Personal Papers, Box 8.

¹⁰⁸ Kaiser, 175-176.

to an even greater emphasis on the militarization of the war. Unlike Kennedy, who always saw a need for civilian reforms, Johnson was skeptical at best. Tired of the inter-agency bickering on the ground, Johnson was predisposed to try to solve the problem of South Vietnam with force. But Johnson was also a New Dealer. He looked up to FDR, and considered ways to apply New Deal ideas internationally. To extend the “American peace” Johnson conceived of, and to establish a new international order, the third world needed economic development to become industrialized nations. Countries like South Vietnam could benefit from the aid which Europe received from the U.S. under the Marshall Plan following World War II. Cooperative strategies that transcended Cold War boundaries could ultimately usher in this “American peace.” With these high ideas in mind, it becomes all the more perplexing that Johnson, little more than a year later, would begin to “Americanize” the war. After securing the Gulf of Tonkin resolution in August 1964 and winning the election in November he unleashed the American military. He ordered North Vietnam bombed on a weekly basis and sent hundreds of thousands of American soldiers to fight in South Vietnamese jungles, all the while abandoning any efforts to improve life for the Vietnamese people. The United States would never win “hearts and minds” in Vietnam and would soon enough lose many of them at home.

Chapter Three: The Man, the Mekong, and the Military

Writing to a Maryknoll Mission colleague in the late 1950's, Reverend Albert J. Nevins spoke of Ngo Dinh Diem fondly:

Perhaps the greatest respect for Ngo can be found in the Communist controlled North. It is said there that Vietnam has only two real leaders. One is Ho Chi Minh, and the other is Ngo Dinh Diem, and there is no room for both of them in the country at the same time.¹

The quote evokes a perception that propelled Diem to power in the decade prior to his assassination. In the mid-1950's he was well-received in the U.S., having lived in New York and New Jersey for two years and having always impressed congressmen, diplomats, and devout Catholics. But by 1963, disillusionment with Diem was pervasive in Washington and Saigon. There was no room left for him in his own country.

If the Reverend was right, did Diem's departure mean the immediate dominance of the North and its charismatic revolutionary, Ho Chi Minh? In fact all it ensured was a vacuum in the South a prospect U.S. policymakers had long feared. That vacuum might be filled not so much with a stable Saigon government but rather with new U.S. policy: conventional war. At the end of 1963, assessing another year of mounting losses, policymakers in Washington aimed to transform the military's role in South Vietnam from one of "advice" to "direction."² Attempting to extend their control past the limitations of *Beef-Up*, those who supported widening the war would find a receptive audience in President Lyndon Johnson. Though the new president would at first resist escalation, in 1964 he would agree to piecemeal measures that would make the build-up of ground forces the following year all but inevitable.

¹ Rev. Albert J. Nevins, M.M. correspondence with unknown (1957), Folder 1 – G.C./Diem, Ngo Dinh/Press Releases, Maryknoll Mission Archives, Maryknoll, New York.

² "South Vietnam Action Report" (June, 1964), Johnson Papers, National Security Files, Country File: Vietnam, Box 201.

Like Diem, Ho Chi Minh's power was not guaranteed, and waned especially during Kennedy's time in office. By the time Diem was overthrown, the first President and Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was 73 years old. He was also no longer the party leader in Hanoi. Having chosen Le Duan to take over in 1960, by the winter of 1963 divisions within the party had become clear. Ho found himself and other moderate colleagues sidelined by party hawks, including Le Duan and generals Le Duc Tho and Nguyen Chi Thanh, who in November and December debated sending North Vietnamese troops to the South and significantly strengthening VC and NLF operations. The leaders agreed on the latter for the short-term, citing concerns that, with the oppressive Diem government ousted, insurgents operating in South Vietnam would have no natural opposition against which their revolutionary message could find a receptive following. Policymakers in Hanoi saw the moment in the South as propitious; if they reinforced the VC to deliver swift victories against the U.S.-backed state amidst a political vacuum, they could deter an escalated U.S. intervention.³

Le Duan was well-situated to advocate for this expanded strategy, as he had on many occasions prior to the fall of 1963. Born to a railway worker, Le Duan fought during the First Indochina War against the French. Following the country's division, he remained in the South and commanded the communist party's southern branch. In 1957, he returned to Hanoi and assumed a position within the Politburo. During a secret trip in 1958 in which he briefly returned South, Le Duan found that Diem's oppression in the countryside had smashed the networks he had left behind. It was then that he began to seriously advocate for greater support of the insurgents.⁴

³ Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 81-82.

⁴ Michael Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War: America's Cold War Crusade in Vietnam, 1945-1968* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997), 34.

The decisions taken by Hanoi did not lead to immediate success, as U.S. policymakers undercut the sound logic that guided them. Some in Washington viewed the war as still winnable, or increasingly began to see the conflict as a grand project of saving-face. Those policymakers advocated meeting escalation with escalation, aggression with aggression, and before Hanoi even came to their policy conclusions, those within the U.S. military mission who had long supported a widening of the war had prepared many plans to Americanize the war. In their minds, two years of failed military policy in South Vietnam with the strengthened advisory role of the U.S. called for more of the same. Simultaneously, calls to “take the war North” grew louder and enjoyed wider support.

Rural development, and “winning hearts and minds,” remained secondary for the U.S. in Vietnam. Interestingly, the escalation and ‘Americanization’ of the war in 1965 would coincide with some concrete achievements in the field of rural development. Yet against a backdrop of escalating war, and lacking a coherent ideology, these U.S.-led developments would amount to little. Quite surprisingly, as rural development finally showed signs of life in South Vietnam, President Johnson, a proponent of economic development, dashed its prospects. Kennedy saw development as a tenet of counterinsurgency, as the programs intended to better rural life and dilute the appeal of the insurgents. Johnson, a Texan and a New Dealer, was inclined to think big and boldly with his policy initiatives. Development, he theorized, could build not only physical bridges in the less developed nations of the world, but ideological bridges between the blocs of nations vying for indigenous support. Johnson further saw development as a project best promoted through international cooperation that, if fully realized, could usher in a new era of diplomacy. Crises like those in Cuba would occur less frequently, and the UN would serve as just one arena for airing

grievances and striking compromises. Leaders of developed nations would withdraw from war posturing and come together in projects of international development.

Unfortunately, a rethinking of development's role on the battlegrounds of Cold War proxy conflicts, or at least in Vietnam, never occurred. Development would stand alone only in Johnson's mind, as holdovers of the Kennedy administration associated development with counterinsurgency policy. And by November of 1963, Washington policymakers had come to the conclusion that counterinsurgency had failed. Many ostensible defenders of that policy (including Hilsman and Harriman), theoretically de facto defenders of rural development, would fall out of favor in the new administration, and resign or see their influence dwindle. Meanwhile, those who pressed for a widening of the war, such as Taylor, McNamara, and the Bundy brothers, gained responsibilities and authority. No matter the stature of Johnson, his new approach would never have been enough to overcome three years of ineffectual military operations.

Discounting the personnel surrounding the new president, Johnson's New Dealer tendencies posed problems of their own – mainly, that they were tied to his Texan identity. Though these two traits might easily find common ground in a domestic scenario, abroad, they could be at odds. As a New Dealer, Johnson truly believed in the revolutionary power of public works projects. They could usher in employment, stamp out poverty, modernize a country, and rally popular support, thereby energizing participation by the international community. Communists and capitalists could meet in the middle, waging wars of ideology that resulted in the objective betterment of non-industrialized societies. Johnson thought big in this way – like a Texan. Yet the similarities stopped there. As a Texan, firm and forceful, Johnson wasn't one to back down from a challenge; he swaggered, bragged, and ridiculed weakness. He'd bring strength and gravitas to

the presidency, just as he had in the Senate. Which begs the question: what course of action would there be left to take when his New Deal overtures fell on deaf ears?

Mutual Hesitation, Mutual Escalation

Just two hours after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, on November 22, 1963 Lyndon Johnson was sworn in as president aboard Air Force One. On his second day in office, he insisted that the new government of generals in Saigon be made aware “that Lyndon Johnson intends to stand by our word.” Despite Diem’s problems, Johnson was distraught with the previous administration’s sanctioning of the coup which killed both Diem and Nhu and had long maintained that the U.S. needed to continue its support the government, and. He believed it now paramount to assure the new government in Saigon that it could count on its US partner. Two weeks later, speaking on the conflict in Vietnam, he told his administration officials that “[w]e should all of us let no day go by without asking whether we are doing everything we can to win the struggle there.” Immediately, Johnson struck a tone more forceful and decisive than his predecessor. In late 1963, having inherited a worsening conflict, Johnson sought to maintain the credibility and prestige which he believed the U.S. commanded in the wake of two world wars, the Marshall Plan, and the defense of self-determination worldwide.⁵

McNamara, who again visited South Vietnam in January of 1964, reaffirmed the deteriorating situation in the country. ARVN draft-dodging and desertion was at an all-time high, and significant GVN weapons losses in the face of emboldened VC attacks persisted unabated. As 1963 came to a close, he found that 40% of the countryside was under VC “control or predominant influence.” In some provinces, the areas of domination totaled 90%. All VC indices – attacks,

⁵ Young, 105-106; Atwood Lawrence, *A Concise International. History*, 83-84.

terrorism, sabotage, propaganda – reignited in November, following a comparative lull. Even VC rates of defection declined. In mounting heavy attacks, the insurgents capitalized on the instability which preceded and followed Diem’s overthrow. Beginning on October 30, VC forces led a two-week campaign resulting in nearly 400 attacks focused mostly on watchtowers and outposts. In late November they scored major victories, overrunning a Special Forces camp near the Cambodian border, downing or destroying twenty U.S. aircraft in the process, and in another siege thwarted helicopters and planes with anti-aircraft weaponry before successfully retreating.⁶

No doubt the VC were partially emboldened by U.S. announcements that 1,000 of the 16,500 military advisors in the South would be withdrawn by January 1, 1964. The plan, put in place by Kennedy, was going forward, even as advisors on the ground bemoaned the “desperate” situations in the countryside. Insurgents were taking rice-rich lands, with substantial populations and sufficient production to sustain the movement. By December, the attacks in force declined. At that point, the VC shifted away towards terrorism, sabotage, and propaganda; moreover, they increasingly targeted American bases. Though these VC actions in March 1964 lacked the magnitude of those from November, their number increased. Facing these new threats, policymakers in Washington called for a stronger military response.

Meanwhile, military advisors in South Vietnam, fearing their phase-out would continue as GVN losses mounted, worked to learn from the mistakes of 1963 in order to strengthen GVN forces. In an effort to increase the mobility of the ARVN, combat units remained in the field for 20 out of 30 days on average. “Clear and hold” operations now replaced terrain sweep (or “search-and-destroy”) operations that advisors agreed had “little permanent value.” Instead they proposed

⁶ “Memorandum From the Secretary of Defense (McNamara) to the President,” *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Volume I, Vietnam, 1964, eds. Edward C. Keefer and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1992), Document 84; “Honolulu Meeting Briefing Book, 11/20/63, Part I”; Kaiser, 290. Kaiser dubbed the latter attack a “larger-scale Ap Bac” despite its lack of press coverage.

to accelerate training for GVN forces and discontinue the strategic hamlet program until adequate defenses could be ensured.⁷

Despite the mounting VC gains after November, the U.S. found itself supporting a government largely unwilling to act. A junta of twelve military officers, who together formed the Military Revolutionary Council, assumed control following the coup in Saigon. These officers were French-educated, *non-Communist* rather than *anti-Communist*, and chiefly concerned with political reforms meant to restore public confidence which Diem's repressions had crushed. They freed imprisoned Buddhists and encouraged political activity, though their liberal reforms created more political factionalism than cohesion. Some members even suggested that the NLF might participate in the future electoral processes. The new government sought to "incline towards the West" but remain free of its influence, which in late 1963 meant freedom from foreign troops above all else.⁸

In accessing the junta, military leaders like Harkins found exactly what they had feared in the months leading up to the Diem coup: a government averse to foreign troop presence, vaguely neutral, and open to negotiations with the North. Civilian officials were equally uneasy. William Bundy, assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs, had said that Washington policymakers simply wanted "any government which would continue to fight." His younger brother, National Security Advisory McGeorge Bundy, was more adamant, warning Johnson not to go the neutralization route. Walt Rostow told Johnson that neutralization would be "the greatest setback to U.S. interests on the world scene."⁹

⁷ Kaiser, 294-295; "Honolulu Meeting Briefing Book, 11/20/63, Part I"; David Halberstam, "SAIGON'S CONTROL IN TWO PROVINCES PERILED BY REDS: Rice-Rich Areas in Mekong in Danger--Top U.S. Aides Report Gain in War," *The New York Times*, November 21, 1963.

⁸ Young, 106-7; Herring, 110-111. For greater depth, see: Fitzgerald.

⁹ Young, 106-107.

In late 1963, Johnson was not fully set on escalation as the response necessary in Vietnam. The new president desired to stand firm. In late 1963, that meant resisting the insurgents and not entering into negotiations with Hanoi, despite calls from the junta, U.S. senators, and French President Charles de Gaulle to do. Yet having experienced the Democrats' debacle after the fall of China in the late 1940's, and having watched Joseph McCarthy run roughshod over the Senate, Johnson feared the right-wing would pounce if he showed weakness in fighting communism abroad. Johnson privately proclaimed that Truman and the Democrats' "loss" of China in 1949 would be "chickenshit compared with what might happen if we lost Vietnam." With those around him urging escalation, coupled with his own political instincts, Johnson rejected peace talks.¹⁰

In early January of 1964, General Nguyen Khanh proposed to Washington policymakers yet another coup. Khanh had participated in the overthrow of Diem, but was excluded from the Military Revolutionary Council established in its aftermath. A younger, more ambitious officer, Khanh was known to Harkins and other top U.S. generals as one of the best in South Vietnam. His position was enhanced because he welcomed U.S. forces and personnel integration throughout military and government ranks.

When Khanh made his proposal, the Johnson administration was struggling to decide on the next step to take in Vietnam. All missions, civilian or military, disliked the government in Saigon and believed it had stalled policy implementation. As the cities of South Vietnam grew more chaotic due to unrestrained political demonstrations, the VC continued their small-scale attacks and domination of the countryside. The administration, thus, threw its support behind Khanh, who on January 24 launched a bloodless coup that overthrew the junta. The U.S. recognized Khanh, despite deep reservations in Washington. A second coup had shaken a country

¹⁰ Dominic D. P. Johnson and Dominic Tierney, *Failing to Win: Perceptions of Victory and Defeat in International Politics* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2006), 10.

already severely unstable, and the problems of Military Revolutionary Council's carried over to the new government fueled by personal ambition. A conversation between Harkins and General William Westmoreland, future commander of MACV, captured the pessimistic mood. Having been made deputy commander of MACV only days prior, as the January coup installed Khanh, Westmoreland asked, "What do we do now?" Harkins replied, "Nothing. You just sit and wait and see what happens."¹¹

Amidst the uncertainty in the South, leaders in Hanoi attempted to estimate U.S. intentions going forward. They believed Johnson was more prone than his predecessor to change the nature of the war by sending greater numbers of U.S. troops. North Vietnamese leaders also viewed Diem's overthrow, at least initially, as a mixed bag. While the vacuum created in the South would facilitate NLF and VC operations, it also held the potential to weaken their appeal. In propaganda and in armed conflict, insurgents in South Vietnam had long cast the Diem regime as an enemy of the people. They claimed Diem was neither nationalist nor anti-colonialist, was politically and socially oppressive, was unsympathetic to the plight of the peasant farmer, and supported the privileged minorities already powerful in South Vietnam; namely, Catholics and landlords. When Diem fell, the mass political unrest that ensued in Southern cities in November 1963 was symptomatic of the sweeping *liberalization* that the junta had ushered in. Without the devil in Saigon, Hanoi worried, the insurgents' allure might wane.

Hanoi's decisions in September 1961 to support the southern insurgents had bolstered VC numbers by 30,000-40,000 over the course of two years. But these troops were mostly southerners who, following the partition resulting from the Geneva Conference of 1954, had fled to the North

¹¹ Paul D. Harkins, recorded interview by Ted Gittinger, November 10, 1981, The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

in fear of reprisals. They had vowed to return, and had largely done so by the fall of 1963.¹² The leaders at the Ninth Party Plenum on November 22, 1963, did not decide on the “gamble” to heavily engage in the South as some historians have claimed. Rather they determined to reinforce Southern insurgents significantly while the war was to remain protracted, as the leaders adopted the language of “gradual advance.” The resolution stated, “it is time for the North to increase aid to the South, [and] the North must bring into fuller play its role as the revolutionary base for the whole nation.” The North anticipated that the U.S. would widen the war, because their failures in the South would encourage the Americans to increase troop levels to bolster GVN forces. To this effect, alongside the increase in industrial production and mobilization, the resolution made clear that national reunification would define the struggle for the South:

We should indoctrinate cadre, Party members, and the people in North Viet-Nam about their responsibility toward the Revolution ... in order to increase their revolutionary spirit, their determination, their patriotism, and encourage them ... to be ready to fulfill their obligation toward the southern Revolution under any form and in any circumstance.

In the meantime, the resolution held, the nature of support towards Southern insurgents would not change, but increase.¹³

The misconception underlying the “gamble” may have come from North Vietnamese Colonel Bui Tin’s report from South Vietnam. Dispatched in October of 1963, the colonel was sent South to assess if the Ho Chi Minh trail (then only bike-wide) could be widened to accommodate Northern troop regiments. Reporting in the spring of 1964, the colonel found the trail ripe for widening. Yet this assessment was overshadowed by his pessimistic report on the Southern forces. Northern and Southern insurgents, together constituting the PAVN, had only

¹² Dr. John Prados, “The Road South: The Ho Chi Minh Trail,” in *Rolling Thunder in a Gentle Land: The Vietnam War Revisited*, ed. Andrew Wiest (Oxford: Osprey, 2006), 81.

¹³ “Resolution of the Ninth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Vietnam Workers’ Party,” December 1963, in *The Vietnam War: An International History in Docs*, 71-72.

recently formed regiments; they were poorly trained and would be unable to resist the ARVN, which was set to grow under the new U.S.-Khanh relationship. Bui Tin concluded that Southern liberation would not arrive without significant deployment of North Vietnamese regular units.¹⁴

Johnson's own advisers shared Hanoi's belief that the president was prone to widening the war. Speaking at the Honolulu Conference on November 20, McNamara proposed the Department of Defense expand and take over all covert operations in North Vietnam from the CIA. While McNamara proposed shifting the burden in Vietnam towards the U.S. military, McGeorge Bundy (following Kennedy's death) revised a draft of NSAM 273, removing language that emphasized building up the ARVN. But Johnson signed the memorandum into action on November 26, on the contingency that it *aimed* to remove most U.S. troops from the country by the end of 1965.¹⁵

The new president was searching for a way to stand strong in southeast Asia, not so much to win the war but in order to avoid being the first president to lose a war. At this time his domestic agenda, *The Great Society*, had the highest priority, and to lose in Vietnam (in Johnson's mind, and egged on by his advisers) would put his domestic agenda at risk. Therefore, in the early weeks of his presidency, he pursued an unclear policy of pressure without force. As McNamara wrote in his memoirs, Johnson was "[g]rasping for a way to hurt North Vietnam without direct U.S. military action." This was partly due to the new president's self-conception, as "just an inherited trustee." Until elected to a four-year term, he felt he lacked the political capital to go to war in Vietnam: "we haven't got any Congress ... and we haven't got any mothers that will go with us." Still, Johnson's wavering would not stand up against those who had long been pushing overt actions against the North and less reliance on the ARVN to get the job done in the South. With Khanh

¹⁴ Porter, 128-129; "The 9th Party Plenum," Clip: Episode 3, *The Vietnam War: Broadcast Version*, PBS.

¹⁵ Porter, 183.

now leading South Vietnam, 1964 would prove to be a year in which those who advocated for greater shows of strength would gain greater influence.¹⁶

Joining the Chorus

As the year began, the hawks scored only small victories. Following McNamara's request from the November Honolulu conference, the CIA and the Pentagon had drawn up a three-phase plan of new actions to take against Hanoi. The plan intended to "increase[e] punishment upon North Vietnam ... create pressures," and ultimately convince the Northern government "to desist from its aggressive policies." Ironically, the notion persisted that the success of the insurgents could *only* be tied to substantial aid from the North, even as leaders in Hanoi had decided on *restraint* a month earlier. The campaigns of November 1963 which so shook U.S. personnel in South Vietnam were mounted by VC troops whose strength had been building locally throughout the duration of *Beef-Up*. And while Khanh initially appeared to be the saber-rattler the U.S. mission sought, by overthrowing the Military Revolutionary Council he had ejected a primarily Buddhist-dominated ruling group, ensuring only further political discord in South Vietnam. Regardless, on January 16 Johnson agreed to only Phase I of the three proposed, giving the Pentagon greater control of covert operations mounted north of the DMZ. Air strikes were too hard to deny, represented too great a commitment, and risked involving Hanoi's allies in Communist China and Soviet Russia. Bombing Hanoi would have to wait.¹⁷

In mid-February, Ambassador Lodge called for retaliatory attacks on the North if Americans continue to be targeted in southern terrorist attacks. Johnson, who feared Lodge as a

¹⁶ Kaiser, 305; Porter, 183.

¹⁷ Kaiser, 293-294; *The Pentagon Papers* (physical), 271-274. Phases II & III have never been declassified, but JCS histories maintain that they included air strikes on North Vietnam.

potential Republican contender that November, was predisposed to heed the ambassador's calls for action. By March 1, William Bundy had drafted what would serve as the "framework" for bombing North Vietnam, which McNamara was happy to sell Johnson on. The plan called for bombing rail lines and industrial complexes, hurting North Vietnam's capacity for production as well as its ability to receive supplies from China. The move would be undeniable and overt, not only inflicting damage on the North but openly demonstrating U.S. resolve in the region. Policymakers hoped it would assure the Khanh government of U.S. commitment to the new regime in the South. This show of support was needed, as McNamara's December assessment of the ARVN was bleak. He believed the forces needed a 50,000 man, \$50 million increase, and suggested Khanh institute national conscription. Bombing North Vietnam, policymakers believed, might encourage Khanh to mobilize more quickly.¹⁸

The proposal was designed with Johnson's concerns in mind, and presented what William Bundy believed to be the least risk of sparking a greater conflict. But Johnson turned down the framework two days later, and instead had McGeorge Bundy revise the recommendations so that policy now classed bombing North Vietnam as a high-risk action. On March 4, Johnson met with the JCS and again resisted calls for increased military pressure on North Vietnam. The JCS envisioned a naval blockade as well as the destruction (bombing) of military and economic targets as a means of applying this pressure. Later that month, Johnson's military aide, Brigadier General Chester Clifton, warned the president that the JCS were dissenting. They felt Johnson was avoiding the right decisions, and that the failure to apply such needed pressures could result in a policy debacle. The JCS did not wish to be part of an "Asian Bay of Pigs."¹⁹

¹⁸ Young, 109-110.

¹⁹ Porter, 188-189.

With policy edging towards escalation, civilian programs had no priority. As discussed in the previous chapter, the end of the Diem regime coincided with the discovery that the strategic hamlet program was in complete shambles. Found to be overextended, falsely-acclaimed, and generally defenseless in the fall of 1963, the hamlets were easy targets of the large-scale VC attacks which ensued that November. For this reason, the counterinsurgency program moved into a new phase that January: New Life Hamlets. The buzz-phrase transition, from “rural development” to “rural reconstruction,” coincided with the destruction wrought on the hamlets following the November attacks. In mid-March of 1964, MACV reported that hamlet militiamen, citing a lack of representation within their newly-appointed local governments, were turning in their guns and refusing to fight. In some provinces, their numbers had declined by as much as 60%.²⁰

The MACV findings complimented McNamara’s report that month: “irregular forces, i.e., Civil Guard and Self Defense Corps, are ineffective and the Hamlet Militia have virtually disintegrated.” In some cases, over 40% of trained militias never received arms to start. Though most province chiefs had been replaced with new officials not beholden to the previous Diem regime, the Khanh government had not yet improved the national government’s outreach to these areas. Moreover, much of the countryside so thoroughly dominated by VC guerrillas and villages controlled by the NLF that roads were impassable. Strategic hamlets would be rebooted, at best, slowly. This process would have little bearing on policymakers in Washington, who had months

²⁰ Kaiser, 310; Nighswonger, 64 & 73. Six criteria were to be met in constructing New Life Hamlets. 1) elimination of VC infrastructure; 2) trained and armed militia; 3) physical defenses completed; 4) communications systems for requesting reinforcement set up; 5) organization of community for civil defense and social development activities; 6) free election of hamlet committee by secret ballot. Following the failures of the strategic hamlet program in 1962-1963, the new criteria was rightly focused on security, and development was further slated as a subordinate priority. See: Nighswonger, 64-73.

prior deemed the operation a failure, and felt the situation in South Vietnam going forward would be best solved with force.²¹

McNamara's March report was also noteworthy in that it generated pessimistic comments from John McCone, Director of the CIA. Oddly enough, McCone advocated for actions against the North similar to those that McNamara, Taylor, Lodge, and the Bundy brothers were calling for – namely, overt. But McCone felt overt actions against Hanoi were best saved for moments where extreme pressure was necessary; in the case of an emergency, or as a way to bring the South Vietnamese conflict to a swift end rather than risk dragging it out. McCone saw overt actions at two ends of a spectrum, whereas the policymakers working to convince Johnson of bombing Hanoi immediately saw it as the only way forward.

McNamara's report made its way to the JCS, and then the president, with McCone's comments omitted. Upon discovering this, members of the JCS were furious, particularly because Johnson had signed off on McNamara's report without having read the dissent. Despite this difference in mindset, McCone's comments were omitted chiefly because he disagreed with the bulk of McNamara's report. He "believe[d] that the situation in South Vietnam [was] so serious that it call[ed] for more immediate and positive action than [McNamara had] proposed."²² In essence he was more, not less, hawkish.

When McCone met Johnson at his ranch in late December of 1963, the new president made it clear he wanted to "change the image of the CIA' from a cloak and dagger role." Johnson had long been suspicious of the Langley spooks. He disliked the power Attorney General Robert

²¹ Nighswonger, 102; "Memorandum From the Secretary of Defense (McNamara) to the President," *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Volume I, Vietnam, 1964, ed. Edward C. Keefer and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1992), Document 84. Hereby cited as "Memorandum From the Secretary of Defense (McNamara) to the President," *FRUS*. The quote attributed to the McNamara report above is in fact a footnote authored by CIA Director John McCone. His comments were omitted when the final report was presented to Johnson.

²² Kaiser, 306-307; "Memorandum From the Secretary of Defense (McNamara) to the President," *FRUS*.

Kennedy wielded in nearly every matter of policy, and intelligence and covert operations were no different. Similarly, the CIA had a long history in Vietnam, having undertaken covert operations (albeit unsuccessfully for the most part) since the 1950's with the assistance of Ed Lansdale. Now, it seemed that Johnson would get his way. McCone agreed with the new president, reasserting the CIA's primary mission as collecting, analyzing, and reporting intelligence. Unfortunately, in March of 1964, Johnson didn't like the intelligence he received. When McCone did deliver his pessimistic remarks to Johnson, he found a president comfortable with the more favorable report his defense secretary had just presented. At this stage, Johnson effectively closed the door on his CIA director. He received infrequent intelligence briefs, especially from the director himself, and it's unclear if Johnson from March to October of 1964 paid much attention to CIA intelligence estimates.²³

²³ Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA* (New York: Anchor, 2008), 236-239. This *might* explain Johnson's increasing fear of Chinese intervention on Hanoi's behalf, even as intelligence estimates doubted such an occurrence. McNamara's March 1964 report found clear evidence of Chinese aid to southern insurgents: ChiCom 75mm recoilless rifles, heavy machine guns and mounts, and large amounts of ammunition had been left behind since July of 1963. But the numbers stand alone, proving no rate or amount of Chinese aid, only that it was a factor. Even McNamara's report maintained that, despite aid, Hanoi wanted to win the war "by itself." Meanwhile, CIA estimates were firmer that spring: "Despite increasing involvement, the Chinese all along were careful to avoid identifying [Beijing] in any direct military sense with Hanoi's defense effort. They also were careful to avoid open commitments to defend North Vietnamese territory." In June, in retaliation for the downing of an escort plane earlier that month, U.S. fighters attacked two military installations in the Pathet Lao zone in Laos. In the process, the fighters hit the local Chinese mission. Beijing promptly accused the U.S. of "wanton bombing and strafing" and proposed an emergency reconvening of the nations that had signed the 1962 Geneva accords assuring the neutrality and coalition government of Laos. See: "Intelligence Study: The Positions of Hanoi, [Beijing], and Moscow on the Issue of Vietnam Negotiations: 1962 to 1966" and Seymour Topping, "PEKING DEMANDS EMERGENCY TALK ON CRISIS IN LAOS," *The New York Times*, June 14, 1964.

These international scares likely deterred Johnson from escalation, or at least stoked his fear of overt Chinese intervention in Vietnam. Unfortunately, these fears ignored facts. Following their long history of oppression at the hands of Chinese rulers, Vietnamese were reluctant to call on Beijing during their war of liberation. Moreover, language of the Ninth Plenum resolution termed the possibility of the war in the South becoming a world war as "almost nonexistent." Meanwhile, China was less interested in overtly aiding Hanoi and more so in preventing Soviet influence in the region. In the winter of 1963, Hanoi and Beijing entered a joint agreement: if the U.S. attacked North Vietnam, China would respond in kind. Unbeknownst to U.S. intelligence, by mid-1964 the Chinese nullified the agreement. In Mao's words, his generals had been "too eager." See: "Resolution of the Ninth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Vietnam Workers' Party," December 1963, in *The Vietnam War: An International*

Military intelligence was what Johnson would pay most attention to in 1964, though not all reports equally. Harkins, the commander of MACV who only two years prior had dubbed the staggering loss at Ap Bac a “certain victory,” was falling out of favor in Washington. Similar to McCone, his reports had become too pessimistic. MACV reports in the spring that year focused on VC political and military successes, as well as the impoverishment of the GVN paramilitary forces. They were right to depict a gloomy outlook. At home, the U.S. was reading more about the vastly superior VC, who ably ambushed and killed U.S. rangers (specially trained in guerrilla warfare) on their way to aiding isolated hamlets. As the rainy season approached, the VC, now with heavier support from the North, was back on the offensive. GVN forces suffered serious losses in life and weapons, and as the VC quickly slipped across the border to safety, Cambodian forces did little to stop the movement.²⁴

News reports that spring wondering left interested Americans wondering what Johnson’s next move might be. The public was already aware by March that Robert McNamara favored some “harassment” of the North in order to get things done. From an extreme corner, presidential contender Barry Goldwater proposed nuclear weapons be used in Vietnam. But in April, former Vice President Richard Nixon, another presidential contender and a more moderate voice, reaffirmed his view that the U.S. ought to remain “properly committed to help these people” and not retreat in Vietnam. Most alarmingly for Johnson, neither of these Republican candidates won the 1964 New Hampshire primary, losing to the Ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., in a write-in campaign. As the spring continued, Johnson edged slowly towards

History in Docs and Bui Tin, “Fight for the long Haul: The War as seen by a Soldier in the People’s Army of Vietnam,” in *Rolling Thunder in a Gentle Land*, 66-67.

²⁴ “Saigon Says Cambodian Forces Let Vietcong Flee Over Border,” May 10, 1964; “U.S. Officer Describes Horror Of Ambush and Jungle Escape,” May 17, 1964; Peter Grose, “Vietcong Hits 5 Targets As Rainy Season Arrives,” May 18, 1964. All articles from *The New York Times*.

capitulating to overt force. Some of his sources said he was losing in Vietnam; others said he wasn't. But both sides advocated for resolve and greater force in turning the tide.²⁵

American Firepower

Ten days after the ambassador's primary win, Johnson cabled Lodge in Saigon. Policymakers considered actions against the North "premature," but were nonetheless in the pipeline on a contingency basis. Johnson also thought it best that Lodge travel to France to meet with de Gaulle, a mission "precisely for the purpose of knocking down the idea of neutralization wherever it rears its ugly head." No plan or show of resolve, other than building South Vietnamese forces, was to be implemented in the meantime, but Johnson was clearly losing patience with those who *didn't* advocate a firm stance in Vietnam.²⁶ As spring turned to summer, the administration prepared the ultimate contingency plan. On May 23, William Bundy penned a "Draft Resolution for Congress on Actions in Southeast Asia." In the event that U.S. forces were presented with *any hint* of Northern aggression, the Johnson administration would ram an enabling resolution through Congress. The resolution authorized presidential use of force without a formal declaration of war, and did so on the grounds of infringement upon South Vietnam's sovereignty, as guaranteed in the 1954 Geneva accords:

To this end, if the President determines the necessity thereof, the United States is prepared, upon the request of the government of South Viet Nam or the government of Laos, to use all measures including the commitment of armed forces to assist that government in the defense of its independence and territorial integrity against aggression or subversion supported, controlled or directed from any Communist country.²⁷

²⁵ Peter Grose, "McNamara Said to Favor Harassing North Vietnam," *The New York Times*. March 14, 1964; "NIXON, IN VIETNAM, OPPOSES A RETREAT," *The New York Times*. April 3, 1964.

²⁶ *The Pentagon Papers* (physical), 285-286.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 286-288.

With even less precise language, the resolution would pass through Congress in early August following the Tonkin Gulf incident. The nature of the resolution – drafted well before the incident which it claimed to respond to – would later become the subject of serious controversy.

On June 20, 1964, William Westmoreland took over command of MACV from Paul Harkins. Upon his appointment, Westmoreland provoked many internal objections. Generals believed him unqualified, lacking leadership skills, and not prone to understanding the dimensions of a counterinsurgency war (as if that still mattered).²⁸ Following his appointment, on June 23 the president announced the retirement of Ambassador Lodge. Policymakers in Washington had long called for this, citing Saigon reports that the ambassador had no new ideas and was not communicating with MACV. The next day, Lodge made clear that he had retired to aid Governor William Scranton's campaign for the Republican party's nomination – essentially, “to prevent Mr. Goldwater from gaining the Republican nomination.” He would be replaced by Maxwell Taylor.²⁹

Effectively, Johnson had replaced the pessimistic hawk leadership in Saigon with optimistic hawks. One of Westmoreland's first requests was for 900 advisors; in July, he asked for 4,200. Meanwhile, Washington and Hanoi sent each other conciliatory messages to no avail. Through ICC Commissioner J. Blair Seaborn, Washington alerted Hanoi that they wished only to contain the North and did not support regime change in Hanoi, but “[U.S.] patience was growing thin.” Washington received no response. Later, through French Communist Party circles, Hanoi conceded that it would accept a partitioned Vietnam indefinitely, so long as the U.S. agreed to completely withdraw. This time, Hanoi received no response. Both administrations had issued the communications while simultaneously increasing aid to their respective clients.³⁰

²⁸ Ricks, 232.

²⁹ Logevall, *Choosing War*, 164; “Lodge Says He Resigned Post To Bar Goldwater Nomination,” *The New York Times*, June 24, 1964.

³⁰ Young, 114-116.

Part of new U.S. measures included more covert raids of North Vietnamese coastal targets and DESOTO patrols off the country's coast. Though naval destroyers were sent only to collect intelligence on the enemy, on August 2 the *Maddox* fired on three North Vietnamese patrol boats after being pursued into the middle of the Tonkin Gulf. The patrols dispersed, the torpedoes from the *Maddox* missing their targets, and the showdown on international waters was over.

U.S. combat troops were put on high alert. Secretary of State Dean Rusk and other members of Johnson's NSC were delighted that Hanoi might be "rattled" by new U.S. forcefulness. They all but welcomed a retaliatory attack. On the night of August 4, it looked as though they had gotten their wish. The *Maddox* and an accompanying destroyer *Turner Joy* reported an attack by torpedo boats in the night, to which they had retaliated massively, firing off rounds for hours. Reports from commanders on the scene and nearby quickly revealed that the incident may have been nothing at all. Captain John Herrick, commander of the *Maddox*, only hours after the attacks reported that the whole thing may have not occurred:

Review of action makes many reported contacts and torpedoes fired appear doubtful. Freak weather effects on radar and overeager sonarmen may have accounted for many reports. No actual visual sightings by *Maddox*. Suggest complete evaluation before any further action taken.

From the aircraft carrier *Ticonderoga* stationed nearby, Commander John Stockdale overflew the purported exchange and reported "[n]o boats ... no boat wakes, no ricochets off boats, no boat impacts, no torpedo wakes – nothing but the black sea and American firepower."³¹

In the hours that ensued, McNamara vacillated. First, he cabled commanders on the scene, demanding to know if the attack had really happened or not. But as negative testimony came through the channels, McNamara chose not to report the bulk of it to the president. After all, Johnson had agreed with McNamara – just thirty minutes following the first reports of attack –

³¹ Ibid, 117-118.

that retaliatory measures were necessary. Just before midnight on August 4, Johnson interrupted national television to address the American people regarding what he understood as the facts in the Tonkin Gulf incident. No U.S. soldiers were killed, and at least two enemy vessels were believed to be sunk. But the renewed hostilities (the August 2 exchange had been reported on), Johnson claimed, “brings home to all of us in the United States the importance of the struggle for peace and security in southeast Asia.”³² The next day, a resolution similar to William Bundy’s late May draft was placed before Congress.³³ It passed the in Senate 88-2, in the House 416-0, and was signed into law on August 10.

Johnson’s statement the night prior did not align with the resolution. The president maintained that this overt attack by the North, though supposedly unprovoked, called for the U.S. to take an increased *defensive* posture:

The determination of all Americans to carry out our full commitment to the people and to the government of South Viet-Nam will be redoubled by this outrage. Yet our response, for the present, will be limited and fitting. We Americans know, although others appear to forget, the risks of spreading conflict. We still seek no wider war.³⁴

Less than two hours later, U.S. planes bombed four torpedo boat bases and an oil storage facility in North Vietnam. Four North Vietnamese were killed during the bombings. These initial actions were indeed limited, retaliatory measures unlikely to provoke a widening of the war. But the Congressional resolution which stemmed from the Tonkin Gulf incident was unprecedented, giving Johnson unrestricted powers in pursuing war-like courses of action without having to seek

³² “Gulf of Tonkin Incident” presidential address (text), August 4, 1964.

³³ The resolution passed by Congress on August 5, 1964 contained language even broader than William Bundy’s draft: “Resolved ... That the Congress approve and support the determination of the President, as Commander in Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression. Sec. 2. The United States regards as vital to its national interest and to world peace the maintenance of international peace and security in Southeast Asia ... the United States is, therefore, prepared, as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom.”

³⁴ Ibid.

the traditional approval of Congress for a declaration of war. Though Johnson had yet to win election in 1964, he had secured an impressive mandate from Congress.

Johnson's actions concerning the Tonkin Gulf gave him a whopping 30-point boost in his approval rating. In the eyes of many hardliners, Johnson had finally solidified that he *would* stand strong in Vietnam; yet his continuous assurances that U.S. troops would not be sent to another Asian theater worried centrist voters who opposed such an intervention. As Johnson campaigned through the final three months, however, chaos erupted within the South Vietnam government. Khanh had become widely unpopular, and that fall resigned as Prime Minister (though he was not officially ousted from the country until early 1965). In the meantime, generals in Saigon vied for power all throughout the fall.³⁵ Meanwhile, in September, Hanoi for the first time deployed North Vietnamese regular units to the South. The insurgent cause thrived with this addition.³⁶

A September intelligence estimate concluded that North Vietnamese domination of South Vietnam and Laos did not guarantee the loss of all of Southeast Asia, effectively challenging the rationale for U.S. involvement in Vietnam and the "domino theory." Still, Johnson's advisors pushed for escalation on exactly those principles. In November, Johnson won 44 states plus DC, with an overwhelming 61.1% of the popular vote. Now with such a sweeping victory, he moved forward emboldened. Less than a month later, Johnson decided on a two-phase expansion of the war. While the first phase would intensify the already-existing air strikes in Laos and covert actions across the DMZ, the second called for a long-term, escalating air campaign against North Vietnam. Phase II, however, would not be implemented until February 7, 1965 as *Operation Flaming Dart*.

³⁵ A rather confusing time in Saigon, Betts and Gelb aptly summarized the chaos: "The political musical chairs game by coup, countercoup, and quasi-coup continued throughout the year; there were seven governments in Saigon in 1964, three between August 16 and September 3 alone." See: Gelb with Betts, 99.

³⁶ Atwood Lawrence, *A Concise International History*, 87. That being said, as late as July 1965, the VC still made up about 97% of enemy forces in South Vietnam. See: Logevall, *Choosing War*, 367.

But Westmoreland received authorization to regularly use B-52s that winter, and sporadic bombings began to target North Vietnam in reprisal operations. Similarly, the number of armed helicopters in South Vietnam was rising, totaling 300 by the end of the year. By the end of 1964, the number of U.S. advisors in South Vietnam would reach 23,300.³⁷

On February 7, 1965, at 1:50 am, VC soldiers opened fire at Camp Holloway in Pleiku. The Camp, a helicopter facility, was first constructed by the U.S. army in August of 1962. The VC attack left eight U.S. soldiers dead, another 126 wounded, and 25 aircraft either destroyed or damaged. Just hours after the attack, on his way to Washington from Saigon, McGeorge Bundy telegraphed the president. In the immediate aftermath of the Camp Holloway attack, Bundy made an impassioned plea for action. He called for “A Policy of Sustained Reprisal,” in which VC attacks and terror acts would be met with tit-for-tat U.S. air and naval strikes.

Ambassador Taylor had cautioned Johnson against the deployment of U.S. troops in early January of that year, arguing that the Vietnamese lacked not the manpower but the motivation (what Bundy called “an appearance of wariness” and “a worrisome lassitude”) to effectively prosecute the war. With this in mind, Bundy viewed “sustained reprisal” as a comfortable middle-ground. Furthermore, Bundy’s plea considered not only U.S. strategy, but U.S. prestige. This was a theme he and other advisors had been pushing on Johnson for over a year now. Johnson’s greatest fears met in Vietnam. To lose Vietnam was to lose political capital and the *Great Society*. And as the first president to lose a war, Johnson knew his prestige and his country’s would plummet. Bundy warned:

The international prestige of the United States, and a substantial part of our influence, are directly at risk in Vietnam. There is no way of unloading the burden on the Vietnamese themselves, and there is no way of negotiating ourselves out of Vietnam which offers any

³⁷ Gelb with Betts, 106; Young, 132-136; Atwood Lawrence, *A Concise International History*, 85-86.

serious promise at present ... To be an American in Saigon today is to have a gnawing feeling that time is against us.³⁸

The domino theory and the prestige theory now paralleled each other, and the application of force seemed the surest way for America to save face in Southeast Asia.

Johnson agreed and the same day authorized Operation *Flaming Dart*. From February 7-24, the U.S. and South Vietnamese Air Forces flew joint bombing missions north of the DMZ. On March 2, Johnson inaugurated Operation *Rolling Thunder*, which intended to accomplish much of the same that *Flaming Dart* had: improve South Vietnamese morale, deter North Vietnam, and interrupt the supplying of the war effort in the South. *Rolling Thunder* would last until November 1968. In the process, it would deliver 643,000 tons of bombs, over 100,000 more than the U.S. had delivered in the Pacific Theater in World War II.³⁹ In the face of this U.S. escalation, the NLF reaffirmed their own resolve. In a statement issued on March 22, the insurgents proclaimed: "Even if we are to carry out the struggle for ten, twenty years or longer, and to suffer great difficulties and hardships, we are prepared to fight up until not a single American aggressor is seen on our soil."⁴⁰ Their combined force in South Vietnam was estimated that month at 140,000.⁴¹ As the spring began, both sides dug in deeper.

With the arrival of planes, Westmoreland felt the need to request troops for security purposes. His request was granted and, on March 8, 3,500 U.S. Marines arrived in South Vietnam with strict orders to *protect* the Danang airfield – they were not to engage the VC. They were there

³⁸ "Telegram from National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy to President Lyndon Johnson," February 7, 1965, in *The Vietnam War: An International History in Docs*, 78-81.

³⁹ Ronald B. Frankum, Jr., "'Swatting Flies with a Sledgehammer:' The Air War," in *Rolling Thunder in a Gentle Land*, 218.

⁴⁰ "Statement by the National Liberation Front about U.S. Escalation," March 22, 1965, in *The Vietnam War: An International History in Docs*, 86.

⁴¹ "Summary Notes of 550th NSC Meeting, 1:15 to 2:40 P.M.," March 26, 1965, Johnson Papers, National Security File, NSC Meetings File, Box 1.

only for defensive purposes. Taylor was nonetheless upset. Returning to Washington for conferences that month, he proposed a wide-range of non-military measures for South Vietnam going forward. These included increased counterespionage and improved coastal transport, but also the clearing of slums, greater aid to education, and land reform. However, as he put it, he found a president uninterested in his reservations and “having crossed the Rubicon on February 7 ... now off for Rome on the double.”⁴² Johnson asked the JCS for proposals that would “kill more VC” that month, and they came back to him with varying troop proposals. In mid-April, two more Marine battalion teams landed in South Vietnam. At that point, there were 33,000 U.S. troops in South Vietnam, with an additional 18,000 on the way.⁴³

As troops deployed throughout the spring and summer, debate raged in the White House. Many describe Johnson as inexperienced, even inept, in foreign policy. For this reason he had kept Kennedy’s principal advisors, and for this reason he had always sought consensus on his decisions. In July, he found little. While advocates against mass deployments viewed the summer as their last chance to keep the administration from plunging into a quagmire, those who favored sending U.S. troops didn’t present the president with rosy estimates. General Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the JCS, when asked by Johnson what it would take “to do the job,” warned that it could take 700,000 to 1 million men and up to seven years. A close advisor of McNamara, assuming a deployment of 200,000-400,000 over the near term,⁴⁴ saw only a 50-50 chance of success by 1968.

⁴² Maxwell Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1990), 341.

⁴³ Gelb with Betts, 120-121 & Appendix 372-374; Kahin, 315.

⁴⁴ These metrics came from a June 1965 cable, in which Westmoreland requested 200,000 troops be deployed over the next year. Though some have said that McNamara found the cable extremely disturbing, the secretary of defense nevertheless ran with it, and placed the number in a draft memo of his own the next day. McNamara’s draft also called for mobilizing 100,000 reserves, and intensified air and naval actions against the North with the intention of wrecking surface-to-air missile sites (SAMs), railroads, industry sites, and mining Northern harbors. See: Erin R. Mahan and Stuart I. Rochester, editors, *Secretaries of Defense Historical Series McNamara, Clifford, and the Burdens of Vietnam 1965-1969*, (Washington: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2011), pg. 36.

But the president saw large deployments as a middle ground; he wanted to give Westmoreland what the MACV commander desired, he didn't want to back down, and he didn't want to provoke Hanoi's allies by going "all-out." In July, U.S. strength in Vietnam stood at 75,000. On July 28, Johnson authorized a vast deployment, which would swiftly bring combined U.S. strength to 125,000. Again, in November, he authorized even more, and the U.S. commitment climbed to 219,000. By the end of 1965, 184,314 U.S. troops were already on the ground.⁴⁵

Going Off the Diving Board

The build-up of troops or "Americanization" of the war in Vietnam which Johnson initiated in 1965 partly reflected US isolation from its allies. By the summer of 1965, the U.S. understood that it would largely be fighting its war alone, though in late May of 1964, Johnson had angrily posed to McGeorge Bundy, "What the hell is Vietnam worth to me? What is Laos worth to me? What is it worth to this country?" He then lamented, "Now, we've got a treaty but, hell, everybody else's got a treaty out there and they're not doing anything about it." Regarding SEATO signatories like Pakistan, the United Kingdom, and Australia, he wasn't wrong. Well before Johnson "Americanized" the war, Western nations had made clear they had no intention to aid the U.S. in widened military adventures in Vietnam. By June, West Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Italy had ruled out any potential military presence. That same month Australia agreed to double its military presence in South Vietnam, raising its regional presence to 60 army instructors and six air force transport planes. Pakistan openly supported de Gaulle's calls for neutralization in the region, and therefore, despite being a key SEATO member, appeared less likely to contribute militarily. In August, Japan agreed to provide \$1.5 million in aid to Khanh's

⁴⁵ Gelb with Betts, 126-129; *The Pentagon Papers* (physical), 385.

government in the form of medicines, ambulances, infrastructure equipment, and radios.⁴⁶ Only South Korea provided a few thousand troops.

At the same time, Johnson looked for a way to avoid further escalation. Reports on the first six months of 1964 were against him: the monthly average of VC-initiated incidents in 1964 (2,100) exceeded that of 1963 (1,500). Similarly, while GVN forces lost 4,700 weapons in combat, VC forces lost only 2,600.⁴⁷ As Kennedy's Vietnam problems persisted, the situation suggested a new approach was called for. Johnson apparently sensed the need for more than military measures. During the summer of 1964, he repeated calls for development that he had made as vice president years earlier. In a June address to Congress, Johnson laid out his vision not only of development, but cooperation:

This great river basin [the Mekong], one of the world's ten largest watersheds, brings untold flood damage each year. Yet it offers the prospect of irrigated lands and navigable streams, of abundant power and increased food and fiber production. Properly harnessed, it could triple the region's rice crop ... Economically, it could rival our own TVA. Politically, it already provides the bond of common hope which causes these nations to forego ancient enmities and plan together for a common future ... we are prepared to challenge the Soviet Union, which shares skills in river development, to match our own efforts in a planned program for the Mekong ... This is the larger vision we have of Southeast Asia. We envision a future when the competition will be waged in taming rivers, in building factories, in feeding people – not in frightening them.⁴⁸

Johnson imagined international cooperation and modernization as a way to escape war.

While historians are keen to point out the futility of Johnson's cooperative development proposals, they shy away from identifying exactly *why* they held so little promise. For starters, the Mekong doesn't run in North Vietnam. In fact the Mekong enters Vietnam south of the DMZ. Only under reunification would the North realize any direct benefits. U.S. policymakers who did

⁴⁶ Logevall, *Choosing War*, 145 & 179-181.

⁴⁷ "VIET CONG ACTIVITY – January Through June 1964," Johnson Papers, National Security File, NSC Meetings File, Box 1.

⁴⁸ "Address to Members of Congress (DRAFT by Douglas Cater)," June 22, 1964, Johnson Papers, National Security File – Country File – Vietnam – Box 200.

believe in this proposal proved themselves no better attuned to the situation in Vietnam than previous administrations. Even if such a venture had proved palatable to Hanoi, the insurgent forces in South Vietnam were not fully dependent on Hanoi; they were inextricably connected only in their insurgency (and during Johnson's tenure, the increased aid which Hanoi provided). The NLF and the VC would never have agreed to such an initiative, having ably controlled the majority of South Vietnam and resisted U.S.-supported GVN forces for nearly a decade.

In March of 1965, Johnson addressed Asian development in more concrete terms. In a rather short, six-point address, Johnson laid out what appeared to be terms of U.S. assistance:

The United States looks forward to the day when the people and governments of all southeast Asia may be free from terror, subversion, and assassination--when they will need not military support and assistance against aggression, but only economic and social cooperation for progress in peace. Even now, in Viet-Nam and elsewhere, there are major programs of development which have the cooperation and support of the United States. Wider and bolder programs can be expected in the future from Asian leaders and Asian councils – and in such programs we would want to help. This is the proper business of our future cooperation.⁴⁹

“Point 5,” as it was referred to in the international press, drew easy criticism from communist ideology. Following the speech, the U.S. embassy in Phnom Penh, Cambodia telegraphed Dean Rusk and McGeorge Bundy:

Local reaction to point 5 of president's March 25 statement on Viet-Nam has been derisive with Depeche (Pro-Communist) editorial saying that “arrogant attitude of imperialist state which seeks to dictate its conditions in exchange for its aid” is unacceptable and attempt to impose U.S. “slavery”.⁵⁰

Though the editorial may appear hyperbolic, it underscores that, no matter how grandiose his proposals, Johnson could not escape the realm of the Cold War. Whether he liked it or not, Vietnam was a proxy conflict, in which ideology mattered. Saigon's legitimacy had been lost for a decade in the eyes of many, and the massive aid the U.S. provided lent itself easily to accusations that

⁴⁹ “Statement by the President on Viet-Nam,” March 25, 1965.

⁵⁰ Telegram, “American Embassy in Phnom Penh to Secretary of State/McGeorge Bundy,” telegram (undated), Kennedy Papers, James C. Thomson Personal Papers, Box 20.

South Vietnam was a “puppet state.” In 1964, the total economic assistance provided solely by USAID was estimated at \$123 million, and it was expected to rise in 1965.

This suggests another barrier to Johnson’s joint development proposals. In the wake of the Sino-Soviet split, Johnson may have looked to the Soviet Union to assist him in dealing an international blow to the growing specter of Chinese communism just north of Hanoi. U.S. intelligence showed that, for much of 1965, Beijing denied Moscow the ability to establish a significant military presence in North Vietnam. They did so chiefly by their refusal to provide an unrestricted “air-corridor” across which Soviet aid could be freely transported. In this way, Beijing consolidated their control over North Vietnam.⁵¹ Additionally, the U.S. national security bureaucracy in 1964-1965 increasingly viewed the Soviet Union as more aligned with themselves than China.⁵² With this vague notion of a joint mission in containment already in play, it was easy for Johnson to continually frame communist China as the enemy on the border of Vietnam who every second threatened to encroach as it had during the Korean War. In this light, it seemed feasible that the Soviet Union could be brought to the table.

The most convincing explanation why that Johnson’s development failed to gain traction lay in the previous years of US involvement. Policymakers had long believed that, through development, they could modernize, and in the process save, Vietnam. But U.S. actions in Vietnam always stressed that security must precede development. Since development in Vietnam was never a priority, it lacked a track record with which Americans could convince Vietnamese of its worth. U.S. policymakers accepted modernization and industrialization as objective goods, but the peasants of Vietnam did not. As one South Vietnamese officer would tell Johnson at a Honolulu

⁵¹ “Sino-Soviet Controversy Over Military Aid to North Vietnam,” Top Secret Trine, January 14, 1966, Johnson Papers, National Security Files, Country File: Vietnam, Box 201.

⁵² Porter, 186-187.

conference in 1966, “we are a small country and we don’t have pretensions to building a Great Society. We just want to have a better society.”⁵³

This plea did not change Johnson’s thinking in 1966, and it wouldn’t have deterred him from his “Peace Without Conquest” speech in April of. The president spoke from a position not only of power, but compassion and isolation. “Each day,” Johnson said, the people of southeast Asia “rise at dawn and struggle through until the night to wrestle existence from the soil. They are often wracked by disease, plagued by hunger, and death comes at the early age of 40.” Invoking America’s current efforts in Vietnam, as well as its reconstruction of Europe in the aftermath of World War II, the president maintained that “[t]he American people have helped generously in times past in these works. Now there must be a much more massive effort to improve the life of man in that conflict-torn corner of our world.” He went on:

The first step is for the countries of southeast Asia to associate themselves in a greatly expanded cooperative effort for development. We would hope that North Viet-Nam would take its place in the common effort just as soon as peaceful cooperation is possible ... For our part I will ask the Congress to join in a billion dollar American investment in this effort as soon as it is underway. And I would hope that all other industrialized countries, including the Soviet Union, will join in this effort to replace despair with hope, and terror with progress.

Johnson believed development in the Mekong to be the centerpiece of this grand vision of international cooperation. The speech also established the foundation for the Asian Development Bank, an institution that would theoretically bankroll important development ventures such as the Mekong Valley Project.⁵⁴

Unsurprisingly, these New Deal overtures elicited no response from Hanoi and Moscow. Johnson continued to lay the institutional foundation for such ventures, but to no avail. In May of 1965, he informed the UN ECAFE’s Special Mekong Committee that the U.S. was prepared to

⁵³ Fitzgerald, 310.

⁵⁴ “Peace Without Conquest,” April 7, 1965.

foot half the bill of the first major Mekong dam, the Nam Ngum Dam in Laos. That proposition anticipated establishment of the Asian Development Bank in 1966. Even after Johnson's "Peace Without Conquest" speech, his administration and the UN worked to make the Soviet Union and North Vietnam signatories of the Bank's charter. Both countries refused.⁵⁵

Johnson's big proposal for development as a road to peace had flopped. As Fitzgerald writes, "[i]t would have been the greatest piece of pork-barrel legislation in history."⁵⁶ But considering Johnson's deep belief in public works, his passion for his own *Great Society*, and his visceral hatred for "that bitch of a war on the other side of the world,"⁵⁷ his proposal's failure must have represented more than the mere failure of pork-barrel politics. Internationally, he was isolated: he had reached out to his allies for aid, and then to his adversaries for peace. From both sides, he was snubbed. Meanwhile, U.S. bombs were falling in Vietnam.

At a cabinet room meeting on July 21, Johnson discussed leaving Vietnam altogether. Under Secretary of State George Ball posed the U.S. "cut [its] losses in SVN" and "let the government decide it doesn't want us to stay there." Johnson replied, "Wouldn't all these countries say Uncle Sam is a paper tiger – wouldn't we lose credibility breaking the word of three presidents – if we set it up as you proposed[?] It would seem to be an irreparable blow."⁵⁸ The next day, at another cabinet room meeting, Johnson was joined by military advisors. Face with yet another of Westmoreland's requests for more troops, Johnson debated with those present. When he expressed his concern over foreign reactions to such large deployments (citing China in particular), he was counseled succinctly, "Least desirable alternative is getting out. Second least is doing what we are

⁵⁵ "U.S. Initiatives in Southeast Asian Development," memorandum for the President from Eugene Black, May 11, 1965, Johnson Papers, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, Box 200.

⁵⁶ Fitzgerald, 311.

⁵⁷ Young, 106.

⁵⁸ "Cabinet Room, Wednesday, July 21, 1965," Johnson Papers, Meeting Notes File, Box 1.

doing. Best is to get in and get the job done.” The president later asked, “Are we starting something that in 2-3 years we can’t finish?” Another advisor replied, “It is costly to strangle slowly, but the chances of losing are less if we move in.” Johnson understood his counseling. To give in to Westmoreland’s demands was for the U.S. to find itself in a completely new war. “This is going off the diving board,” the president remarked.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ “Cabinet Room, Thursday, July 22, 1965,” Johnson Papers, Meeting Notes Files, Box 1.

Conclusion

Throughout 1964 and 1965, civilians attempted to convince the Johnson administration that development was not worth giving up on. They presented what they believed were examples of concrete progress to help development's case. A litany of information was provided. USAID workers had helped construct simple, economical water wheels and wooden windmills throughout the countryside. Fertilizer was being introduced to farmers who had never used it before, and in 1964 USAID would procure twice as much as it had the previous year. An improved variety of sweet potato increased yields from 5-10 times over the average. By February of 1965, hog cholera had been eliminated in South Vietnam. These projects sought not only to develop, but modernize South Vietnam. One report touts the success of "[t]eaching the primitive Montagnard tribal people how to use water buffalo as beasts of burden rather than as sacrificial animals." Local elections were encouraged and assisted. Enrollment in elementary schools stood at 1,400,000 in 1963, up from 300,000 in 1955. Due to a USAID-led vaccination initiative, the malaria incidence rate in large areas dropped from 7.22% in 1958 to 0.77% in 1962.¹

Still, the case for development was hard to make. When counterinsurgency was deemed a failure in the fall of 1963, development was as well. The strategic hamlet program in particular had convinced policymakers that development, at its best, would prove a distraction. The countryside required safety above all else for these projects to take, and the countryside was far from safe by the summer of 1965. But 1963 also signified the climax of U.S. aid to South Vietnam (within the 15-year period examined, 1950-1965). Putting aside the failure of counterinsurgency, what modernization could be celebrated at the end of 1963? The results were damning: a

¹ "Aid to Economic and Social Progress in Southeast Asia: Laos, Thailand and Vietnam," 1964, Kennedy Papers, Thomson Papers, Box 20; "Information on Non-military Programs for Speech Material Input," May 1965, Kennedy Papers, Thomson Papers, Box 25.

countryside full of angry and susceptible peasant farmers who used on average less than 33 kilowatt hours per capita per year.²

Other civilian metrics implored policymakers for support and depicted a dire situation, and in the process underscored the prominence in the war effort. In May of 1965, there were approximately 750 doctors within all of South Vietnam; 400 of them served in the army, further depleting a country already in desperate need of adequate medical care and personnel. That same month, USAID announced its intentions to increase its presence in South Vietnam from 540 to 663 “in the near future.”³ Why bother? In April, William Gaud, Administrator of USAID, had reported at a White House meeting on Vietnam that USAID had “no new projects.”⁴

In the 1950’s, some policymakers voiced concerns about the “two-pronged policy” which the U.S. began to pursue. To bring guns *and* butter to a distant land seemed contradictory, and many predicted that something would have to give. As the insurgent crisis grew in South Vietnam during the late 1950’s, the Eisenhower administration prepared for a war that would never come. The military mission stripped power from the civilian mission so that a significant GVN defense apparatus could be built up. This was the first instance of prioritizing security above all other initiatives. This prioritization made sense, as minds of the Eisenhower administration believed that a strong state relied on the existence of a strong military.

They were not wrong. As the military stripped the civilian mission of power and influence, they bolstered a government under Ngo Dinh Diem with a massive security apparatus. This would only further complicate the project of development. Where government workers were supposed to

² “Mutual Defense and Development Programs FY 1965,” Johnson Papers, National Security Files, Agency File: AID 11/63-12/64, Vol. I, Box 1.

³ “Information on Non-military Programs for Speech Material Input,” May 1965, Kennedy Papers, Thomson Papers, Box 25.

⁴ “Summary of NSC Meeting on April 2, 1965 – Cabinet Room, 2:00 p.m.,” Johnson Papers, National Security File, NSC Meetings File, Box 1.

instigate civic action and development projects, they instead extracted bribes from and harassed peasant farmer populations. Peasants of the countryside found themselves unable to identify or even like their government. With his U.S.-backed military forces, Diem drove peasants towards the southern insurgents. Communist, nationalist, and simply anti-Diem propaganda was met with broad appeal, especially following land schemes like the painful and disruptive “agrovilles,” and later the strategic hamlets.

When Kennedy took office, there was a reorientation of policy. Development looked as though it would receive new attention. But Kennedy was also given to resisting communism, and was not going to back down in Vietnam. Early on, Kennedy even believed Vietnam could win his administration some redemption in the wake of losing Laos and bungling Cuba. Counterinsurgency in Vietnam, therefore, would be the answer: a package deal, which would combat guerrilla warfare with advanced paramilitary techniques, all the while squashing the appeal of the guerrilla with development projects that would modernize and win over the “hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese society.

This proved problematic as the situation in Vietnam deteriorated. Kennedy’s counterinsurgency doctrine tied military defense measures and development in a mutually exclusive package: they worked in conjunction. Yet, as some policymakers of the 1950’s had worried, one of the two prongs in the policy would have to give. Development did. Counterinsurgency, originally envisioned as a grand policy of moving parts, was not a process. Once security was achieved, and once the population was controlled, *then* it could be reached and undergo development. As the insurgency in the South worsened throughout the early 1960’s, security seemed less and less achievable. The failure of force begot more force; rural life was again

traumatically disrupted with the strategic hamlet program; those charged with championing development, like Roger Hilsman, Walt Rostow, and U.A. Johnson, proved to be impatient hawks.

With that, the Johnson administration had little concern for development. Johnson himself talked of development projects on a grand scale, likely the only way he conceived of such things. But these projects had a dual purpose: modernization, as well as diplomacy. They weren't meant to prevent the appeal of the guerrilla as much as question the way global competitions were waged, and inevitably expose the non-modernized world to the benefit of American technology, public works, and "can-do" attitude. Johnson wanted cooperative efforts to *replace* proxy conflicts, and saw the joint development of the Mekong as a first step in southeast Asia.

There would be no room for this approach in 1964-1965. At home, Johnson was increasingly surrounded by hawks who, following the failures of 1963, had roped development in with counterinsurgency and damned the entirety. Abroad, countries perceived America's war footing and chose to back away. Johnson's vision for international, cooperative ventures would never work if only he drove it forward.

Development without "Hearts and Minds"?

This project has assumed that "hearts and minds" were continuously lost because development was either not implemented or not given proper priority status. Losing "hearts and minds" and failing to develop, then, are tied together. There are reasons to believe, however, that even in America's most promising moments, even when development seemed a possibility in South Vietnam, that development in the true American sense may have not won "hearts and minds" anyways. Policies for development were built on fundamental misconceptions of Vietnamese society, and threatened very basic elements of it, like subsistence farming. U.S. ideology,

furthermore, was confused, and where defined it could not supplant the lack of “moral purpose” with which the Vietnamese disregarded development.

The motto of the strategic hamlet program had been “It worked in Malaya—by God, it’s going to work here.”⁵ Nothing could be further from the truth. One resists the urge to throw Edward Said’s *Orientalism* at the civilian counterinsurgency policy planners who coined the term. But it emphasizes the point that the civilian mission in South Vietnam “understood” the Vietnamese people no better than the military mission did. Agrovilles had violently uprooted peasants, placed them on new plots of land, and told them to build a new life. Though a consensus *seemed* to develop in the aftermath of Diem’s agrovilles – that they were too disruptive, did not work, and were counterproductive – the U.S. from 1962-1963 elected to bankroll and even greater project of rural disruption and social chemistry, the strategic hamlet program. This produced much of the same results; it also significantly helped the VC in their tactics and the NLF in their appeal.

Rufus Phillips in September of 1963 ably presented to president Kennedy why military *and* civilian projects were failing in Vietnam. Strategic hamlets at that point could be said to be a near-military endeavor, but their failure would ultimately reflect poorly on those who conceived of it. There are reasons to doubt that strategic hamlets as they were originally envisioned, however, would have made a broad appeal to peasants. Had peasants responded positively to the uprooting, the herding, the barbed wire, and the free-fire zones, they would still have to reckon with American notions of farming. Looking to their own country as the inevitable blueprint, U.S. policymakers thought of agrarian development in terms of large-scale enterprise. They favored the way this utilized land, brought greater employment, and even greater yields. In the minds of those who championed development in South Vietnam, development would look like the doubling, tripling,

⁵ Fall, 272.

quadrupling of a crop. Even in 1965, policymakers discussed the prospects of increasing the national rice yield by 2 to 5 times in the next five years. Discussions agreed this would be an objective good; only the turbulent countryside, controlled by the enemy, stood in the way.⁶

U.S. conceptions of the objective good in certain development initiatives, however, were not likely to be shared. In Vietnam, a subsistence agriculture society had long prevailed. Large-scale farming and international markets were never going to entice peasant farmers who had enjoyed increased autonomy under the Viet Minh. Tough on landlords, the Viet Minh provided farmers with the land and society necessary to more-comfortably feed their families. U.S. hopes for vastly expanding the agrarian enterprise in South Vietnam would have decimated these abilities. As the establishment of big plots strengthened the relationship between the U.S.-backed government and landlords, maintaining a small piece of land for subsistence purposes would have become untenable. U.S. development in this way would have torn even further at the very framework of South Vietnamese society.

Development also proved disruptive in that it witnessed the proliferation of foreign aid and personnel in an already-ravaged nation during the 1950's. In *Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta*, David Biggs contends that, even though U.S. policy makers talked of development at great lengths, their perceived ideology of modernization did not transfer over to South Vietnam. Biggs writes:

[N]ation-building in this era was less an ideological campaign drafted in Washington and Saigon and more a series of concrete events involving transfers of technology, bodies, and new commodities into heavily contested regions beyond the major roads, canals, cities, and airports.⁷

⁶ "Information on Non-military Programs for Speech Material Input," May 1965, Kennedy Papers, Thomson Papers, Box 25.

⁷ David Biggs, *Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), 154.

The sole focus on the proliferation of developmental capital failed to get at what Ed Lansdale was concerned with throughout the 1950's: "how the Vietnamese *felt*." But as David Lilienthal surveyed southeast Asia in the early 1960's, he found a region ripe for development only in terms of resources; the people there lacked "a moral purpose," without which no foreign intervention could engender modernizing growth. Whatever the Vietnamese felt, the U.S. could neither deduce nor impose their own conceptions of development on those feelings.

Regarding agrovilles and strategic hamlets, U.S. policy appeared especially devoid of ideology. In the late 1950's, the chief complaints lodged against the Diem regime by civilian offices were that the president was failing to undertake land reform. When Diem finally did, he was criticized for not going far enough: rents of 15-25% of the season's harvest were considered too onerous. What U.S. civilians failed to realize was that pre-Diem rent rates had typically ranged between 40-60% of the season's harvest.⁸ *Diem had taken a big step*. He was not inclined to completely destroy the landlord class, as the group constituted his power and his allies in the countryside. But what were U.S. goals in pressing Diem further? Civilian policy makers wanted to significantly release the burden on peasants, and called for even lower rents and less-cumbersome contracts. Was the U.S. trying to "out-communist the communists" in land reform? Simultaneously, they insisted that the landlord class not be completely wiped out. U.S. civilian policymakers tiptoed towards communism and a grand assertion of tenants' rights even as they reaffirmed their capitalist mission in South Vietnam. What was palatable land reform supposed to look like in South Vietnam? Diem could never have done enough to satisfy civilian policymakers in this department. There was no ideology guiding the criticisms.

⁸ Charles Stuart Callison, *Land-To-The-Tiller in the Mekong Delta: Economic, Social and Political Effects of Land Reform in Four Villages of South Vietnam* (Boston: University Press of America, 1983), 42-51.

With these concepts in mind, the concrete achievements of 1964-1965 can be seen as meager development, but development nonetheless. But “hearts and minds” had not been won, and were largely lost because of the disruptive policies which had aimed to promote development. The desire to modernize South Vietnam was not shared between the giver and the receiver. And as the U.S. turned increasingly to war, development efforts became synonymous with force. As the U.S. escalated throughout Kennedy and Johnson, it hurt any chances for development. U.S. development lacked ideology; communist warfare did not. As the foreign, capitalist superpower attempted to provide guns *and* butter to a distant land, it became easier for the communists to train the attention of the peasantry on the guns.

The American Failure in Vietnam

Had the U.S. been able to develop to the extent which civilian policymakers envisioned, the issues discussed above would have likely created lasting tensions. But this is not the way things went in Vietnam. The civilian mission was consistently ignored and stripped of authority. In this process, the military was able to meet every obstacle with force. As the military increasingly controlled the narrative of U.S. success in Vietnam, it ably rationalized that the failure of force created a need for more force. Development was claimed to be a goal in the countryside, and policymakers supposedly believed it would weaken the appeal of the insurgents as well. As force and security were repeatedly prioritized over development, however, the appeal of the southern insurgency only grew stronger. Rather than create efficient, modern villages, the U.S. destroyed ancestral homes and aided an oppressive government in their relocation to defenseless villages and political concentration camps. Self-determination was nowhere to be found. Especially during the

Diem regime, U.S. efforts stoked nationalist and communist sentiment in a way that only a foreign, capitalist superpower could.

Development projects that failed to start accentuated the prevailing role of the military, the mindset of force, and the overall lack of concern for “hearts in minds” in Vietnam. Abandoning whatever development projects the U.S. put in place created even more chaos. In a countryside “blanketed with little Dienbienphus,” Vietnamese peasants in the 1960’s increasingly found themselves with a faced with an easy choice: to side with the government, or the insurgents. Against the government misused taxes, harassed peasants, and insisted on a factitious national hegemony and cause, the combined appeal of the VC and the NLF proved seriously enticing. If a village aligned with insurgents, they would find their taxes suddenly well-manage; landlords would flee, and local leadership would be reintroduced; GVN forces wouldn’t dare approach, and if they did, adequate defenses were in place; and a common goal of reunification and the banishment of colonial powers quietly pervaded the countryside.

Johnson had long worked to establish himself as the president with the gumption needed to redefine Cold War diplomacy; were his New Deal overtures to fail, however, he was also a man of considerable resolve. Johnson’s grand vision may have been what development needed. But Johnson redefined development in his approach: projects would have to be bigger, bolder, and serve less to dissuade peasants from aiding insurgency and more to stop the gunfire altogether. To assume that the Soviet Union and other Communist bloc nations could share in such imaginative development schemes with the bastion of global Capitalism, or to assume that such cooperative schemes were considered objective goods in the minds of all global leaders, put Johnson’s naiveté on full display.

From 1950-1965, a two-pronged policy did not work in Vietnam. As development was sidestepped, the military perpetuated its own problems and created its role. Development saw little progress during this era. When Johnson took office, a renewed hope in development briefly arose. But it was not to be. Eisenhower and (more so) Kennedy had combined their objectives of force and development in Vietnam to create a grand policy of failure, one which abetted the insurgency crisis in the South. Johnson took a different approach, and placed the two on opposite ends of the spectrum. Johnson saw war and development plainly, as starkly contrasting one another. If one wasn't going to work, the other would have to. With Johnson, it was to be guns *or* butter for Vietnam. For too long, half of the two-pronged policy had corroded the other: U.S. military force destroyed any chance of U.S. development. Realizing the contradiction, Johnson settled for just one prong. Now U.S. military force would only destroy Vietnam. Americans had never held the "hearts and minds" of the people in Vietnam, and now they never would.

Note on the Bibliography

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